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**OTEP
INTERVIEW**

**DAVID W. LANDRUM
DANIEL P. COUGHLIN
GEORGE W. MORROW
JEANI RECTOR
KENNETH E. HERRITT
MARC CICCARONE
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BERTHA TODD

BY DAVID W. LANDRUM

ILLUSTRATION BY ALONDRA PONCE

WHEN SHE LEFT,
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IF HE DID NOT RELEASE
THEM.

LARRY ROSSMAN PULLED INTO THE DRIVEWAY of *Bertha Todd* at dusk. His band's national tour had been long and exhausting. After two months of performing three concerts a week, he was glad it was over. Now he could rest, write some new songs, and enjoy being with his girlfriend, Robin Bennett, here where they would not be harried by fans or the paparazzi.

"So this is the magic place," Robin said as she got out.

"This is it," he replied, smiling. As he unloaded the car he remembered how his band had not done particularly well until he moved here. His first weekend here he wrote four new songs that landed his band a recording contract. This was followed by a sold-out tour and best-selling CD. A second CD with more high-quality songs on it (all written within the walls of *Bertha Todd*), was in the making. Their agent was currently organizing a tour that would take them to Europe, Japan, and Australia.

The connection between the house and Larry's improved song-writing had not gone unnoticed. His friends joked that a ghost was helping him out or he was shacking up with his muse. The cabin, named *Bertha Todd* after the woman who built it, sat on an isolated lake in northern Michigan. Larry found it a perfect place to write music.

After a few days there, Robin became bored.

"Who was Bertha Todd?" she asked him one day.

"The woman who built this place," he answered. "That's all I know about

her.”

“There’s a library not far from here,” she said. “I think I’m going to drive into town and see if I can find anything on local history. I’ll give you some time alone and maybe I’ll do some shopping too. I want to see if I can find out anything about Bertha Todd.”

Larry said this was fine and gave her money for shopping.

When she left, absolute quiet descended on *Bertha Todd*. The urge to create suddenly settled on him. He had felt this before, but that evening it came on him with an intensity that bordered on violence. He felt tunes, ideas, lyric, churn inside him like pent animals struggling to get free, threatening to rip through his skin if he did not release them. He picked up his guitar, turned on a small cassette recorder and played. Words and music cascaded from his mouth. His guitar streaked chords and runs into the gathering dark. In a creative haze left him disoriented, he wrote two new songs. When he played them back he was astonished at how good they were.

The overwhelming feeling of creative presence did not leave him once he finished writing the songs. It lingered, so strong it almost seemed like a personality. He paced the room and finally decided to go outside to walk off some of the energy that coursed through him with unsettling velocity. In fact, he felt almost as if he were being commanded to leave the house. He threw on a jacket and struck out for a walk along the lake shore.

Once he got out of the house the feeling of agitation lessened. He walked and listened to the waves roll in. He had only gone a short distance when he saw a woman moving toward him down the beach. She waved and he stopped. She wore an earth-toned skirt that came down to her ankles, socks and sandals and a beige turtleneck sweater. She was tall, with straight hair; she had a well-formed face with a square chin, a wide full mouth and big green eyes shot with brown. She wore her long brown hair parted down the middle. She had tucked a book under one arm. The girl smiled when she came close to him.

“Hi. Are you Larry Rossman?”

“That’s me.” He wondered if she were a fan who wanted his autograph.

“My name is Tess Bristow. Someone told me you were staying here. Do you have a friend named Robin Bennett?”

“I do.”

She held up the book. “She left this at the community

center. I think it’s her diary.”

He took it from her. “Thanks. I’ll return this to her. Are you a visitor here, Tess?”

She smiled. “I actually live here. My family’s lived here a long time. In fact, my grandmother built the house you live in and my mom grew up in it.”

“Your grandmother was Bertha Todd?”

“That was my Gammy. Mom grew up in the house you live in now and married a local guy. We about four houses down the road.” She pointed. “My grandmother moved out after Mom got married, but kept the house and always stayed here in the summer. She died about ten years ago and we sold the house to a retired lady from the south of the state.”

“That would be *my* grandmother. She left it to me in her will. I’ve been living here about a year, though I never stay in the cabin for very long at a time. It’s a beautiful place. I come here when I’m not out on the road.”

“You’re with Cherry Velvet, right?”

“Right. You like our music?”

“Who doesn’t?”

Her natural friendliness encouraged him to talk.

“Do you work or are you in school?” he asked.

She was in college, a senior studying metallurgy at Marquette University.

He laughed at that. “Metallurgy? I thought you were an English major or something like that.”

She laughed loudly, covering her mouth with one hand. Her directness pleased him. He encountered lots of phony, pretentious people in the music industry. He found this woman’s lack of affectation refreshing.

“Must be the outfit,” she smiled, with a gesture at her long skirt. “My family is kind of left-wing artistic. My grandmother was a musician and a professional singer. My Mom teaches English at the Community College up the road and is an amateur dancer. My Dad’s a commercial artist.”

“I bet you broke their hearts when you told them you were going to become a metallurgist.”

By now it was getting uncomfortably cool. The sky had darkened.

“I’d better go,” she said. “I didn’t open the book, by the way. It was unlocked and open when I found it.”

“Well, thanks for returning it. And it was nice meeting you, Tess.”

“Same here. Bye.”

She turned and walked down the beach then up a set

of wooden stairs that led into the trees. He watched her go, surprised and pleased that she had not asked for an autograph.

He turned to face the lake. Stars had emerged in the darkened sky above the water. He tucked Robin's diary under his arm and cautiously entered the house. The feeling that had driven him out of *Bertha Todd* was gone now. He smiled, amused at his own fear of being alone and in solitude. Larry Rossman lay the book on a shelf, sat down in a chair, and dozed off.

He woke up when Robin returned. She had bought several new outfits with the money he had given her. They got cleaned up, he put on a suit, she a spangled black party dress, and the two of them drove into Traverse City to dine at a nice restaurant.

During the course of the meal, she mentioned that she had found out something about *Bertha Todd*.

"She was a professional singer in the 'thirties. Really popular, too. She had the house built as a get-away and used to have big parties with people like Clark Gable and Ernest Hemingway attending. Then something happened."

"What?"

"She got pregnant. I guess she was raised a devout Catholic and didn't want an abortion. Word got out. This was the thirties—Prohibition, fundamentalist revivals and all that. It was quite a scandal. Her concerts were canceled. After she had the child, booking agents didn't want to handle her performances and people didn't want to come to her concerts. She couldn't perform. Pretty soon people forgot about her."

She had a daughter, Robin went on, named Millicent Todd, who eventually got married and had a girl herself. During World War II, she made a comeback—sang on the USO circuit. But after the war she came back here to raise her daughter and live a quiet life off her earnings. After that she traveled a lot. Bertha was pretty and there were rumors she was a kept woman of an older rich man in England, but no one ever proved it.

They returned to the cottage. Larry slept late that morning. When he got up, after nine, he heard Robin in the front room, swearing and bumping around. He threw on a pair of pants and went to investigate. She was looking for something and had thrown books off the shelves and moved furniture. When he called her name she turned with a start.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"I can't find my diary. You don't know where it is, do you?"

He had placed it on the bookshelf in plain sight. When he glanced over, he did not see it. He looked around at the mess she had made searching and then back at her. He was about to tell her someone had returned it, when she swore loudly.

"Damn! I bet I left it at the Community Center!"

Larry glanced over at the shelf. He wanted to save her a needless trip but hesitated: she might wonder if he had flirted with Tess and he did not feel like going through an interrogation. Before he could say anything else, she ran out the door, shouting that she needed to find her diary because it contained some personal things she did not want anyone to read.

After she left, he walked over to the bookshelf. The diary was exactly where he had set it down but concealed by three large, heavy books—dictionaries or encyclopedias—bound in real leather. He thought he had laid the diary out in plain sight and knew he had not placed any other books on top of it. He wondered if Robin, in her frenzied search, had accidentally covered up the very thing she was looking for.

He held the diary in his hands a moment. It was white and its vinyl exterior was decorated with a pattern of purple flowers. He wondered why she had been so agitated to find it. He hesitated then opened it.

Larry spent the next half hour reading a chronicle of her contempt for him. According to what she had written, planned to hit him up for a large sum of money and then leave him.

She returned twenty minutes later. "I couldn't find it," she lamented.

He held it up.

"Right here. Interesting reading."

He called a taxi. She gathered her things. He gave her enough money for a ticket back to LA and incidental expenses. They did not speak. She departed an hour later.

He brooded all afternoon. The money was nothing but in her diary she had said he was too stupid to finish college and too stupid to do anything but strum a guitar. This stung him. Larry had done only one year of college. He enjoyed himself, was fascinated by the topics his classes covered, but did not have the discipline to read his assignments or turn his work in on time. He barely got through the first semester. Second semester, he was playing more with the band, so he dropped out.

Through the four years of the band's club circuit, his parents had urged him to quit the foolishness of trying to be a rock star, go back to school, and get a job. The

people he had graduated from high school with went on to become accountants, teachers, physical therapists. He lived a marginal existence as an itinerate musician.

He had been vindicated, of course. Now he had more money than his parents and working friends all put together. But his lack of a college education was a deep sore spot.

He drove into town, had at Folgarelli's, came back to *Bertha Todd*, made some phone calls, and tried to play the guitar. He was too upset to write. He lay down on the couch in the front room, dozed off and woke up at dusk.

Larry opened his eyes. Outside, the light was fading. Immediately he felt restless and frightened, as if something sinister and threatening lurked in the shadows of the empty house. He chided himself for being afraid of the dark or of ghosts. All the same, the eerie sensation grew stronger.

He turned toward the stairwell. A surge of fear tore through him when he caught sight of what appeared to be a woman, greenish in color, glowing, transparent, dressed in flowing white dress. For just a moment he felt caught in its power—a power that he knew could draw out his soul and absorb it into pulsating flux of light and energy that hovered in front of him like a gaping hole in reality. Hot flashes of terror shot through him. He stepped back, slipped, but caught himself before he fell. The horror that had filled the whole house engulfed him like a waking nightmare.

Then suddenly the apparition disappeared.

Larry stood there, trembling, sweat pouring down his neck, and then ran for the door, pushed it open, and stumbled outside.

He took deep breaths of cool evening air to quiet the fear that had flooded over him. Stars blazed above the darkening lake. A crescent of moon hung above the trees. As he watched the night sky, two meteorites streaked across the horizon. The wind made him shiver.

He wondered what had happened. He took a step toward the house but something stopped him cold. Larry Rossman did not believe in ghosts or spirits but he knew that whatever the mental cause of what he had just experienced it would not be a good idea to go back inside. He needed something to get his mind off the split with Robin and the bad psychological baggage that went with it. He noticed the lights of the Community Center. He decided he would get a cappuccino and a bagel at the coffee bar there. Caffeine would help.

When he got there, the parking lot was filled with vehicles. Well-dressed people streamed into the main auditorium. A

whole herd of little girls in leotards scurried toward the front entrance, all of them accompanied by parents. He walked into the coffee bar.

Only one table was occupied, and its occupant was Tess Bristow. She sat alone in the center of the room. She had on a sweater and short skirt. Her eyes lit with recognition when she saw him. She said hello.

He came up to her table and gestured at a chair.

"May I?"

"Sure," she answered.

He sat down. A waitress brought her cappuccino and bagel. Larry handed her some money. "I'll pay for this and have the same."

The waitress left. "Thanks," Tess said.

He pointed to the brightly lit room where the most of the people were heading.

"What's going on?"

"A recital. My Mom has a dance class. Her little girls are performing and then she and another woman are going to do a couple of art dances. I had to decorate for it, so I didn't get a chance to eat. I wanted to grab something before I went in."

"I'd like to go. Do you need a ticket?"

"Yeah, we only have so many seats. Is Robin with you?"

"Robin went home." She looked up suddenly. "For good," he added. "We had a fight."

"I'm sorry."

"I happened to glance into the diary and saw what she wrote," he went on. "I don't usually do things like that but she seemed so frantic to find it when she got in the other day I wondered what she was hiding."

"I saw some of what she wrote," Tess said, apologetic. "It was lying open and my eyes just fell on it."

An awkward pause followed. It was happily broken by the waitress bringing Larry's coffee and bagel. They ate and drank in silence for a moment.

"Would you like to see the show tonight?" she asked, her voice timid.

"The dance recital? Tess, I'd love to."

"I have an extra ticket. I was supposed to go with a friend but she can't make it."

"That would be great. Thank you."

She looked embarrassed but pleased. "Well, we better finish eating and go in. Show starts at seven."

They finished their food. As he walked in it occurred to him that most colleges started classes in August. He wondered what she was doing home in late September.

They had seats on the front row. He stole glances at her. Tess was tall with a heavier-framed body than Robin's. He guessed she was a soccer or volleyball player. But he also noticed how she sat with grace and poise. If her mother danced, he thought, it was likely she had taken ballet or dance as child.

The program began.

A woman in a leotard and a dance skirt came out on stage. Fond applause greeted her. Tess gave him a quick glance to tell him this was her mother. She was tall and straight with a dancer's lithe body. Her hair was lighter than her daughter's. They did not resemble each other much (she must look her father, he surmised), but their expressions and smile were the same. Mrs. Bristow looked very good for a woman who must be over fifty, he thought.

She introduced two troupes of girls, first very young ones in pink leotards and white tights, then older girls in black. Each group performed a series of reasonably good dances. Afterward, Tess's mother gave a short talk on the local dance troupe and did two modern dance numbers, the second of which was to one of Cherry Velvet's songs. She was an excellent dancer.

A reception followed. When the crowd of parents and little girls that thronged Mrs. Bristow had diminished, Tess introduced Larry to her mother and father. They seemed bright and intelligent and he liked them immediately. The father talked about Cherry Velvet's music and seemed to know something about it, but he was not boorish and did not try to be familiar or ingratiating. The mother, who was even more attractive up close, was talkative and friendly. Tess stood by smiling while her mother and father conversed with Larry. After a while she excused herself to talk with some friends.

The father also went off to talk to some other people. Larry continued to chat with the mother, who went by the nickname Mil. She said Tess had taken a week off from school and was returning on Monday.

"Has she been sick?"

"She went through a pretty tough break-up with her boyfriend. They had been dating two years. In fact, he was supposed to come down with her this weekend to see the recital. She decided to come home early and stay a few days to sort of recover."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"Tess is a sensitive girl and took it pretty hard."

He glanced over at her. She was with two other girls. They were laughing and animated but she was subdued.

He and Mil Bristow talked on. She drank several glasses of wine as they spoke. The hall began to empty out. Tess joined them again. She listened politely for five minutes or so then asked if she could be excused because she needed to get home and get to sleep.

"Can I walk you home?" Larry asked.

Tess glanced questioningly at her mother, who laughed.

"Tess, you're twenty-two years old. You don't have to ask me if you can walk home with someone."

She looked over at him and grinned. "Sure."

They left the building and headed out into the chilly night air.

"I like your parents," Larry said.

"They've been the best parents anyone could ask for."

They walked slowly. It was not far to the Bristow house. As they got nearer she thanked him for sitting with her at the recital.

"The pleasure was mine, Tess."

She looked as if she were contemplating whether or not to speak. Then she said, "I was supposed to go to the dance tonight with my boyfriend, not a girlfriend like I said."

"Your mom told me guys broke up."

"We did."

"Then I guess we can be partners in misery. You can be sad over him, I can be sad about Robin. Can I ask what happened?"

"He wanted me to move in with him. I didn't want to. He said we were finished."

They had stopped. They were standing in front of *Bertha Todd*.

"I'd say he made a very bad choice."

She glanced at the cabin. "Do you like living here?"

"It's a nice place—very quiet."

"When I was a little girl I would spend hours with my grandmother there in her house in the summer. We were really close."

Silence fell. Because sadness seemed to be creeping over Tess, Larry decided to change the direction of their conversation.

"You're Mom's a good dancer."

"She used to dance a lot but not so much anymore."

He smiled. "Is age setting in? She still looks in good shape to me."

"It isn't age. She doesn't practice anymore and doesn't have the focus she used to. My mom's an alcoholic."

He was surprised at the news and more surprised that she had opened up this way.

"I'm sorry to hear that, Tess."

She looked down. Her hair fell over her shoulders.

"Being a single parent up here is hard. My grandmother wasn't married and Mom took all the abuse that kids from single-parent homes used to get back then. I think that's how she got started drinking. She and Daddy are both in denial about it."

He did not know what to say. Another silence came.

"Well, anyway," Tess said after a moment, "Mom is excited that I met you. She's getting worried about me."

"Worried?"

They sat down on the low stone wall that separated *Bertha Todd* from the beach and dock area.

"You know the old fear mothers always have—that I'll never get married—or that I'm going to get depressed—or maybe secretly she thinks I might start drinking."

They watched the moon above the lake. They sat together for a long time without speaking. She leaned down, picked up a stone, and threw it into the lake. They heard the splash.

"I'd better go," she said. "It's been nice talking to you, Larry."

"Let me walk you the rest of the way home."

He walked her to her door.

"Will you be around?"

"I'm going back Sunday."

"It would be nice if I could see you again."

She gave him a smile. "If I know my mother, she'll call you up and invite you to breakfast. That's an old move of hers."

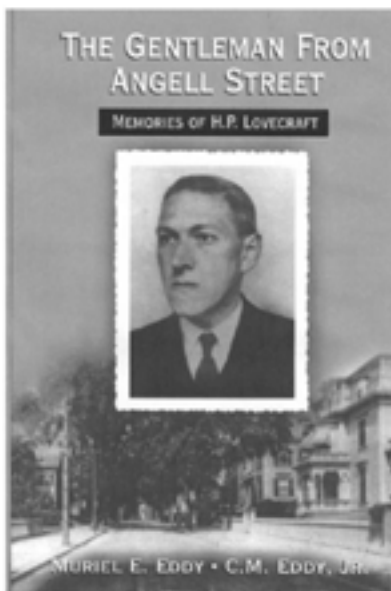
"Should I accept?"

"I'd like that a lot."

He wanted to kiss her, but it was too early. He said good-night and returned to *Bertha Todd*.

He went into the house, apprehensive about what would await him. He did not see the apparition. The interior felt quiet and safe. He sat down on a chair, still wary, picked up his acoustic guitar and began to strum. He thought of Tess. He began to play a series of chords. A melody suggested itself, then phrases and ideas that become lyrics. He turned

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on his recorder. Within an hour he had put the finishing touches on a love ballad.

After he had finished, the phone rang. It was Steve McNally, one of his managers.

"I heard Robin split," he said.

"How did you find out about that?"

"I guess she told a couple of gossip-column writers she saw at O'Hare. They called me to see if I had anything to add before they put it on the internet."

He gave him the details. Steven laughed and said he had suspected as much.

"You always fall for her type. Any prospects up there?"

"I met a local girl."

"Tell me how she was."

"I will." Just to be consistent with the kind of banter he and Steve always fell into, Larry added, "I'll be sure to have her laid before you guys get up here next Wednesday for practice."

Steven laughed. The chatted on and he finally hung up the phone.

After he hung up the phone, Larry felt a cold, dead eeriness settle around him. He looked this way and that, sensing someone else was in the room. He saw no one but the silence and stillness of the house alarmed him.

Fearing a repeat of what had happened earlier, he made for the door, grabbed the knob, and tried to turn it. It would not open. He jiggled the handle. It would not move. Suddenly something like a jolt of electricity tore through his body. He screamed and fell to the floor. The air in the room thickened. It roiled with waves of what felt like anger.

Wobbly and disoriented, Larry got to his feet. A book—one of the large, leather-bound volumes that had hidden Robin's diary—rose off the book shelf and sailed through the air, striking him in the face, knocking him down. Blood spurted from his nose. He got to his feet again. Another heavy book flew through the air and struck him in the chest. He fell down once more, fighting for breath. The interior of *Bertha Todd* cabin was turgid with rage. Another heavy book hit him on the shoulder.

He opened his eyes and found himself on his back directly beneath an ancient oak bookshelf filled with large, heavy volumes. The weight of the books it held was probably hundreds of pounds. It began to wobble, as if ready to fall on him. He looked up at it.

A small light of clarity entered his mind.

"I didn't mean it," he whispered.

The malevolent anger that surged in the room like a

thousand invisible knives paused.

"Please," he whispered, "I'm telling the truth. I didn't mean it. It was just a joke. I'm sorry."

The storm of vehemence he felt—the rage that filled the house like an evil maelstrom—stilled, then, slowly (he would even say *cautiously*), dissipated. The charged air grew calm. He cautiously got to his feet.

Blood poured from his nose. His legs shook so badly he could hardly stand. He felt pin-pricks on the back of his neck and wondered if his hair was standing on end. Breathing in to steady himself, he went to the door and put his hand on the handle. It would not turn. He let go of it, not wanting another jolt to knock him down.

Larry staggered into the bathroom and washed his face. The taste of blood running down the back of his throat revolted him. His hands trembled as he washed. He looked around apprehensively, feeling he was not alone. He changed his shirt and headed over to try the door again, knowing he had to get out for his own safety and sanity.

As he walked through the front room the phone rang.

He jumped, startled by the noise, but picked it up by instinct.

"Hello," he said.

"Larry? This is Mil Bristow."

He did not respond immediately. Then he gained some control of himself.

"Hi, Mrs. Bristow."

"Did I wake you up?"

He realized he had to sound normal. He was too rattled to explain what had happened to him and did not want to be questioned about it.

"I was dozing, yeah."

"I'm so sorry. I just called to find out if you would be interested in breakfast tomorrow morning. We usually have a pretty big breakfast on Saturday and like to invite people over when we can, so I'm inviting you."

He recalled what Tess had said. The correctness of her prediction would normally have made him smile but he was far too frightened to smile about anything.

"That would be fine. I'd enjoy that a lot. What time?"

"Is seven too early?"

"No, I'll be there. Can I bring anything?"

"Just yourself."

He thanked her and hung up the phone.

Rather than walking to the door, he sat down in a chair. As he gazed at the floor of the front room, the volumes that had struck him into the air; but this time they were

snapped back to the gaping, empty slots they had left on the bookshelf. He did not move. The lights in the house dimmed. Silence fell.

His cassette recorder clicked on.

The song he had written—the love ballad—began to play. Whether he was being held in the chair or was too paralyzed with fear to get up, he was never quite certain afterwards, but, unable to move, he sat and listened in the darkness to his own voice singing. The song ended and the player clicked off. The lights came back on. He could move again. He got up.

Rattled, he walked into the kitchen, splashed his face, and threw away the wad of bloody tissue he had been holding to his nose. He drank a glass of water. He looked over his shoulder to see if anyone was watching or anyone was in the house. Still exhausted from shock and fear, he collapsed into a chair.

The thing that had frightened him was still a strong presence, but now he experienced it differently. It was softer—what he would describe as *sorry*. He had to stop this, he told himself. He was hallucinating. The stress of the concert tour and his break-up with Robin had taken its toll on him. He stood up and tried to exit the house through the kitchen door. The handle there would not turn either. The front door remained sealed. The windows were similarly fast. Yet the atmosphere of *Bertha Todd* now seemed benign. He did not feel the anger that had moments ago engulfed him and did not surmise that he was in danger. Thinking it pointless to try to get out, he tuned and went back into the kitchen.

A book lay on the old wooden kitchen table. It had not been there two minutes ago.

It lay open. He saw a photograph of a little girl he recognized as Tess, eight or nine years old with short hair, wearing a sun dress and sandals, flashing a child's huge smile. He noticed her eyes. They were the same as now: big, shining, innocent.

He felt such a strong presence near him that he looked over his shoulder. He thought he saw something move, something white and hazy, but it could have been a trick of light. He put the photograph in his pocket.

He tried the kitchen door. This time it opened.

He walked into the moonlit night. He could drive to Traverse City, find a motel, calm down and get a grip on himself. But looking out at the moon above waters of the lake, the stars and planets in the sky, thinking of Mil, whom he hardly knew but liked, and of Tess, who seemed

so innocent and vulnerable, he hesitated.

He turned his eyes to the Bristow house, dark and quiet, a little way down the beach. He looked at the photograph. The porch light came on. He had promised them he would come to breakfast. Why be afraid of ghosts? And if it were a ghost . . . he dismissed the idea. After more hesitation, Larry Rossman went back into *Bertha Todd* and went to bed.

He woke early, drove into town, bought some grapefruit juice so he would have something to bring to breakfast, and got back just at seven. Tess, pretty in jeans and sweatshirt, her hair in a ponytail, smiled at him in her unaffected way. Mil looked nice, Tess's father was gregarious. Larry ate, talked, enjoyed himself, went for a long walk with Tess afterwards, and asked her if she wanted to go to the movies that night. It was Saturday. She would be returning to Marquette in the morning. He spent almost the entire day with her. After they got back from the movies, he kissed her on the back deck of their house and told her had something for her.

"I found this in the house." He handed her the photograph. "It was in a book. I picked the book up and it fell out."

He noticed her eyes as she looked at it. She gaped in amazement for a long moment then walked to sliding glass door that led out to the deck.

"Mom! Mama, come here!"

Mil came out of the kitchen. Larry noticed she stumbled as she walked through the sliding glass door. He could see she was drunk. She took the photograph and gasped. Tess was crying. Mil looked up at him.

"Larry, where did you get this?"

"I found it in the house."

Mil looked as if she might also begin to cry.

"My mother took this picture of Tess on the day she died. She had come back for the summer but hadn't told us how sick she was. Tess visited that morning. My mother snapped this photo and gave the roll of film to us to develop. When we got back from the One-Hour Photo Lab, she was gone. This picture was the only one on the roll. Then it turned up missing. You said you found it in the house?"

"It was stuck in a book."

She shook her head. "I thought it was gone forever. It just disappeared a few weeks ago."

They both speculated on how it might have got there. Neither could come up with a plausible explanation.

Sunday, when Tess was ready to go back to school, Larry

saw her off with the family. He promised to visit her at Marquette. Her parents seemed elated. Tess tried to cover up her happiness at what might be a new beginning, but her direct, unaffected manner made it hard for her to conceal her feelings. She drove away. Larry planned to leave on Monday.

Nothing of note happened Sunday afternoon. He called his parents and sister and then hung up the phone and went outside.

He saw Mil Bristow carrying a bulging brown paper bag toward the community dumpster. She raised one arm to wave at him, and when she did the bag slipped and tore. As many as twenty empty wine bottles rolled to the ground. He rushed over and bent down to help her gather them up.

As they were loading them into another bag, Mil glanced over at him and caught his gaze. She threw an empty bottle of Blue Nun wine she had been holding to the sandy ground. It did not break but made a hollow thudding sound.

"She knows, doesn't she? Tess—she knows."

Her eyes glistened. Larry nodded.

"Yes, she knows."

"I've got to do something. I'm starting to have blackouts. Sometimes I'll find myself in bars or even at the college where I teach and I don't know how I got there. I can't remember things I did for whole days sometimes. Maybe that was how the photograph got in the cabin. I might have taken it, put it in the cabin, and never even knew I did it."

"You've admitted you have a problem, Mil. You need to tell your husband and daughter then tell your friends. And you need to get into therapy. I know you can beat it."

"How do you know that?" she asked bitterly.

"I know where you come from. I know a little about your mother. I see all that you've overcome and accomplished. And you have your husband and your daughter to support you. I'm sure you can beat it and get it behind you."

Tears spilled from her eyes. He helped her throw away the empty wine bottles and walked her back to her door. She put her arms around him and thanked him.

"I'm happy for Tess," she said. "I can't communicate how much she means to me and how much she meant to my mother. Unless you knew her, and how close we were to her, you couldn't understand."

But he did understand. He and Mil stood by the back door to her house and talked about therapy programs. Ten minutes later, her husband drove up in a car. After he had greeted them and the three had chatted a while, Mil took

his hand and told him they needed to go inside and talk.

Larry went back to the house. He packed up his car to head south. He would drive down and stay with his parents a few days before the other band members came up to see him at *Bertha Todd* and to hear the new songs he had written. As he left, a quiet serenity descended on the house. He paused in the front room, turned around, and spoke out loud.

"I see it now. You've given me what you had to give. The songs I wrote made our group successful. I'm in your debt. I owe you a lot. Tess is a wonderful woman. I promise to respect her. We'll see where things go. And Mil—well, I imagine you heard what she said." He paused then grinned. "I'll be back in a few days."

The emanations he felt were of joy and, he strongly sensed, amusement. He turned, went outside, locked the door behind him, and climbed in his car to drive south.



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DANIEL P. COUGHLIN: A PROMISING NEW VOICE IN OLD SCHOOL HORROR

INTERVIEW BY EMMANUEL PAIGE

PHOTOS PROVIDED BY DANIEL P. COUGHLIN

DANIEL P. COUGHLIN IS A WRITER OF SCREENPLAYS and fiction, and with two feature films to his credit, *Lake Dead*, which was selected by Lionsgate for their 2007 After Dark Horror Fest – 8 Films to Die For, and *Farmhouse*, a film that is still in production and soon to be released, he is well on his way to becoming a name in the horror/thriller genre. His stories are well written with a brute force no-holds-barred style that rivals the best horror movies ever written, and with the influence of such Hollywood heavyweights as Wes Craven, who has acted as a mentor of sorts, there is good probability that Daniel will be the author of future horror classics.

Daniel has always had an interest in horror movies since he was a boy growing up in Watertown, Wisconsin, and has always wanted to be a horror writer. After a stint in the United States Marine Corps infantry where he served as a machine-gunner stationed at Camp Pendleton, California, and served in Operation Desert Fox, he was honorably discharged and then earned a degree in Film and Television from California State University at Long Beach.

One night while Daniel was attending a party with some friends, a producer from Alliance Group Entertainment

happened to be present, Jason Hice, and mentioned that they were looking for horror scripts. Daniel happened to have one in his car, *Lake Dead*; they wanted to take a look at it. After reading it over a beer, Jason said he would get back to Daniel. Two weeks later, Jason was on the phone giving Daniel some good news: they liked it. Shortly thereafter the executive producers, Todd Chamberlain and Mike Karkeh, told Daniel that *Lake Dead* was exactly what they were looking for and they cut him a check. The rest, as they say, is history.

Macabre Cadaver: You are an accomplished scriptwriter with two movies, *Lake Dead* and *Farmhouse*, to your credit. Do you feel like you have arrived and are a force to be reckoned with in Hollywood?

Daniel P. Coughlin: I'm proud of what I've accomplished but I also know that I have a long way to go in this industry and genre before I can consider myself a force. I'm just thankful that I have two movies in the can and it helps that some of the genre lovers believe in me.

MC: You have a degree in Film and Television from California State University at Long Beach . . . what sparked your interest in taking up the study of writing for the screen?

DPC: Misspent youth in Wisconsin . . . kidding. I've always been a movie junkie and horror fanatic. I used to go to the video store with forged letters from my parents saying that it was okay for me to rent R rated movies. I would hide movies like *Children of the Corn*, *The Exorcist*, *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, and *Halloween* under my mattress and then wait for my parents to go to bed so that I could watch them. To sum it up I have always known what I've wanted to do with my life. Be a horror writer.

MC: Hollywood is a rough place for a scriptwriter to make a living or get noticed. How did you get your foot in the door?

DPC: Funny you ask. I was a junior at Cal State Long Beach and a friend was having a party. Jason Hice, a producer from Alliance

Group Entertainment was there and happened to mention that they were looking for horror scripts. I told him I had a script in my car. He told me to get it, I did and he read it over a beer and told me he'd get back to me. I really didn't think anything would happen but two weeks later Jason called me and had me take a meeting with the executive producers Todd Chamberlain and Mike Karkeh. They told me *Lake Dead* was what they were looking for and, no shit, cut me a check. Jason Hice became one of my best friends. I was also working for Wes Craven at the time so I had some pretty good advice.

MC: How does it feel to work with such names as Brian Alan Lane and Wes Craven?

DPC: Pretty fucking cool to put it lightly. Brian became my mentor and Wes has always been my favorite director. I never for one second forget how lucky I am to have their influences. Brian Alan Lane has been a blessing to me and many other young writers and continues to push

me to be a better writer.

MC: I read your biography on IMDB and managed to track down some leads on your career. You are rather humble, in that I didn't find a website with your name on it, or a fan page, or any shameless self-promotion. Do you like to keep a low profile?

DPC: I would rather spend my time coming up with new stories. I really am just in love with storytelling.

MC: Right. I agree. There isn't enough time in a day to get everything done, and then write too. Bentley Little loathes the internet. Says it's a big distraction. I think he's right.

DPC: I didn't go on the internet until 2003. I strongly agree with Mr. Little and I still can't figure half this internet shit out sometimes. By the way I just read *The Town* and had a blast reading it.

MC: I haven't read that one yet. But I think I'll put that one on my list. I'm just finishing up *Heart Shaped Box*, Joe Hill, and I'm not sure what to think of that one. I don't even have much time to read anymore. Too much Internet browsing.

DPC: I have *Heart Shaped Box* on my list. I am currently reading *Black House* by Stephen King and Peter Straub. I want to read William Peter Blatty's *Legion* before I get to it.

MC: Good book. I've read that one [*Black House*].

DPC: I like to keep a low profile.

MC: How and when did you get interested in writing? What is your writing schedule? Do you write full time?



DPC: I have been writing horror since I can remember, in fact my mother had me psychologically evaluated after reading some of my stories in the fifth grade. I write everyday and almost all day. I do hold a part time job as a camera operator for a few automotive reality shows, *Chop Cut Rebuild* and *Street Tuner Challenge*. I guess I've always found solace living inside my head and pouring it out on paper.

MC: Some writers have traditions, like listening to certain music while they write, drinking a fine malt beverage, or smoking a fine cigar after finishing a piece. Do you have any traditions that help you compose, or celebrate a finished piece?

DPC: I celebrate by kicking back with a case of Pabst Blue Ribbon and watching either *Halloween II* or the original *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. I don't know why but it's a treat every time.

MC: You write fiction as well as screenplays. Any plans for novels in the future?

DPC: Yes. I have been wanting to write a novel for a long time and I am just now feeling that I'm ready for it.

MC: Do you like writing for the screen better than for print? Screenplays over books?

DPC: I think that writing a book would be more rewarding for a writer but I haven't written one yet. I have to say, I fall in love with every character and story I come up with and I try to make them as three dimensional as possible whether it is pros or screenplay. As of lately it is nice to see as many words packed onto a sheet of paper as possible and I hope



to have my first novel done by the end of next year.

MC: What is your favorite novel?

DPC: Stephen King's *"IT"*

MC: Good one.

DPC: I've read it three times.

MC: Who is your favorite writer?

DPC: Stephen King.

MC: This one is the question that all horror writers seem to get a kick out of, and I just have to ask: Where do you get your ideas?

DPC: I have an overwhelming fascination with human response and a film and fiction warped mind. As far as the darkness that comes with horror, I dealt with a few too many tragedies at a young age and have a fascination with death as the result.

MC: I can understand that.

DPC: Yeah, use it or it abuses you.

MC: Right. I've written some pretty wild stuff. The subconscious has a way of leaking out onto the page. It's either that or maybe go insane.

DPC: I agree one hundred percent. It would be cool to read some of your work. I love a good read.

MC: I've got quite a bit. I just got so focused on publishing lately, I don't have time to pursue it right now.

DPC: Find it . . . damn it.

MC: Okay. I'll do that. Actually, there is a story in Macabre Cadaver, Issue 1, "The Dead Horse Saloon" . . . You can find it in the archives.

DPC: I'm on it!

MC: There have been a lot of people talking about the horror genre and saying that it is dead. More so in fiction than movies, but dead nonetheless. Do you think that is true? I certainly hope it isn't dead. And if it is, we have to revive it.

DPC: Horror shall never die as long as human beings exist. Whether people admit it or not they want to be scared, it's fun, it's exciting, it's thrilling and it lets you know you're alive. On top of that, horror is therapeutic in that it allows us to confront our worst fears in a controlled environment where we can get up and leave at any point.

MC: I watched your movie, *Lake Dead*, and I really liked it. It was way more horrifying than I expected.

DPC: Thanks. I wanted to write something horrifying. All you can do is hope that it comes out effectively.

MC: It was effective. I'll give you that. I noticed a lot of influence in *Lake Dead*, archetypes, like the Bates Motel, *Halloween*, *Wrong Turn*, *Friday the 13th*, and such. It was a powerhouse of good unrelenting horror themes. Did you intend to go for the jugular with this one?

DPC: I wanted to write a "slasher" film that had heavy influences from my favorite films but still wanted it to maintain its own identity.

MC: It was unique. I just saw that it had all of the big scares built in, and the rules . . . you know . . . from the movie *Scream*. Having sex and using drugs always gets you killed first. *Wrong Turn* was also a good example of this.

DPC: Yes. The rules definitely apply and I had a blast enforcing them.

MC: Lionsgate included your film *Lake Dead* in *After Dark Horror Fest – 8 Films to Die For* . . . that's pretty awesome. Were you surprised?

DPC: I got a call from the director George Bessudo, literally, a week before it came out in the theater. We were both ecstatic that our movie was selected for the fest. Yes, I was surprised.

MC: How involved were you in the creation process of your movies, in the writing and filming? What was it like to be involved and see your creation come to life?

DPC: I did the rewrites during the short development process and then it was all George Bessudo which I have to add, he shot this entire film in three weeks with a limited budget. The summer we shot this film was surreal and I made it to the set almost everyday.

MC: You've done some cameo roles in your films . . . any desire to take up acting more seriously?

DPC: No! We needed extras.

MC: What's your new movie, *Farmhouse* about? I know you can't spoil the plot, but can you give us a little sneak peak? Is it an all out brutal horror movie, or is it more of a thriller?

DPC: *Farmhouse* is more of a thriller/mystery swimming in the realm of horror. A young couple packs up moves after they lose their infant son to start a new life. They break down in the middle of nowhere and wind up in the care of a strange country couple (Steven Weber, Kelly Hu). The country couple becomes more and more deranged as the plot unfolds into something that has been in your face the entire time. I won't spoil the end but I have to say I am proud of what we have and the film turned out great. There are a few over-the-top brutal scenes but they are necessary for the story.

MC: Do you have any advice for aspiring writers interested in writing screenplays?

DPC: Watch movies. Write, even if you think it's crap and then write some more. If you're exhausted and can't get off the couch . . . dig deep, push yourself onto the floor, crawl over to the computer and punch in those keys. That and love it!

MC: Okay. That's it. Anything else you would like to add?

DPC: I did want to say that while I was writing this film [*Lake Dead*] I actually thought of my girlfriend and her friends, their names are Brielle, Amy and Kelli. It was very easy to kill her friends but the reason Kelli didn't die was that I had a hard time killing her in the story, not that I didn't *want* to kill her . . . on paper . . . but I couldn't bring myself to do it. And if you notice at the end of the film when the SUV carrying the young people shows up, that's my brother Ryan Coughlin who says "This place is fuckin' awesome."

MC: You get attached to your characters. I know how that is.

DPC: I love every character, I think it's important to fall in love and find an attachment to every character. It makes the story so much richer.

MC: That's the key to good writing. You have to love it, and your characters.

DPC: I think so.







A SHORT WALK TO THE END

BY DANIEL P. COUGHLIN

ILLUSTRATION BY BENJAMIN DEAN

THE POLICE WOULD
JUST ARREST DAVID,
PROCESS HIM AND
THEN GIVE HIM A LIGHT
SENTENCE. THAT WAS
FINE AS FAR AS THE
LAW WAS CONCERNED
BUT WHAT ABOUT THE
PEOPLE THAT MATTERED,
THE PEOPLE THAT LOVED
JULES?

AFTER THE FIRST WEEK OF SEARCHING, Richard knew he would never find his daughter alive. He felt it in his bones.

Up until four months ago Richard Benton had managed to create and enjoy a nice little slice of heaven in the small town of Watertown, Wisconsin with his wife, Sherry, of twenty-five years and two daughters Mary and Jules. The Benton's were the average American family living in the average American small town. Things were nice and life was comfortable. Richard spent the occasional night on the couch when Sherry and he would get into one of their little "tiffs" but that was the extent of their marital problems. Like most of the other community members Richard worked at the bottling company and Sherry was a preschool teacher, they were high school sweethearts and still very much in love. Their daughters were well mannered and maintained good morals as Sherry and Richard instilled in them the best they could. A small town seemed to be a perfect setting for the Benton's.

Watertown is the kind of town where people are friendly and the most heinous crimes that occur are the ones involving one man with another man's wife. There's the occasional drunk driving incident and everyone mourns the loss of a community member when a tragic accident brings them together. No one is considered extremely, financially, well off and the tone is that of the working class. The community has its share of

drinkers and degenerates but overall everyone is good to each other.

The night Jules brought David Miller home for introduction Richard knew the winds of change had decided to knock at his doorstep. He said all the right things and he was polite. Sherry really liked him and they could both see that Jules had fallen hard for this boy. Richard just didn't feel right about him for some reason. He pawned it off as being overprotective of his first-born but the feeling didn't shake, even after a few months.

Jules had been on the football cheerleading squad since she was a freshman in high school and now one of her former pals was going to get married. She wasn't a bridesmaid but she was a good friend and wanted to be at the wedding with her classmates.

She'd gone to the wedding reception around ten o'clock that night with David. At two o'clock in the morning David had given up trying to find her and went home by himself. At first Sherry and Richard thought she may have hitched a ride with some of her girlfriends and gone to an after-party or some such thing. They didn't expect her home that night but when they hadn't heard from her by noon the next day they'd gotten worried. Emptiness swallowed Richard and he knew within the first week that he would never find his daughter alive.

When he found a diary underneath Jules bed wedged between some of her boxes he decided to start his own investigation into the matter. The first entry he read had shaken him so badly that he'd nearly hyperventilated into a panic attack but he kept his cool as he always did.

June 27, 2006

David took my virginity last night and it really hurt. I think I am in love with him but I don't quite know if he feels the same way about me. I really hope he does, I love the way he smiles and the way he looks at me. He was gentle with me last night and he was respectful during and after it happened. We didn't use a condom but I have a good intuition that he doesn't have any diseases so I'm not too worried.

This first entry was how the nicely bound journal opened. The thoughts swarming through Richard's head were maddening. His baby girl was having sex with a boy that he, quite frankly, didn't care too much for. How could this have happened? He'd raised her so well and even though Jules was seventeen years old he still saw her as the whiny little three year old toting around her "blanky" and crying when she couldn't find her mommy or daddy. Richard decided to check up on his good old friend mister David Miller at this point. He pulled out his cell phone and with sweaty hands slid his fingertips across the keypad

pushing the appropriate numbers. The phone rang three times. Richard's heartbeat started to race. A voice echoed through the receiver.

"Hello." David answered with a shaky voice.

Richard almost slapped the cell phone shut but his anger wouldn't let him. He clenched his jaws and took a slow breath.

"David, have you heard anything?" he asked, gripping the cell phone so tight it nearly slipped from his hand.

"I wish I had sir. I'm really starting to get scared." David answered with unavoidable sincerity. Richard didn't let the tone of David's voice cloud his thoughts. He had to be sure.

"Look David, I found her diary."

Silence is all that came from the other end.

"Are you there, David?" Richard asked after a few seconds.

"Sir I just want to say that I was in love with your daughter. What we did was out of the love we. . .well sir I don't quite feel comfortable talking to you about this." he said.

Richard closed his eyes tight and held back the scream that wanted to bellow out from his soul.

"I know David but you have to understand that I'm trying to find my daughter who has been missing for over a week now. I need you to go over everything that happened the night she disappeared. Where did you go? Who were you with? Did you stop anywhere to carry out your business? I think if you go over these things with me. . .I think that maybe we can figure some things out."

"Mr. Benton, I told the police everything I know." he replied. And as an anxious father looking for his missing baby Richard started to become perturbed. He needed the answers. The police wanted the answers but damn it! HE NEEDED THEM!

"Look David. If you don't answer me I'm going to become suspicious."

"What's that supposed to mean?" he replied in a tone that Richard didn't appreciate.

"If I find out that you hurt my baby in any way I'm gonna rip your fucking . . . You know what David? . . . I'm sorry I called. I shouldn't have called you like this," he said as his anxious nerves became numb.

"That's okay sir. We're all worried right now and we need to stay optimistic," he said.

After Richard hung up the phone he started planning his vengeance. His tone, the sly manner in which he answered the questions so. . .correctly. Richard knew that David had more to do with Jules' disappearance than he was letting

on. Richard sat at his desk in the basement and stewed over everything. Thoughts of embracing his daughter for the last time swam around in his head until a sharp pain in his left hand disrupted his focus. When he looked down to his hand he noticed a thick stream of blood running down his wrist. He'd clenched his fist so tight that he'd torn the skin of his palm apart. He cleaned the mess and then went to Jules' room. He picked up her diary and sat on the bed. He wanted to know his daughter, the part of her that she kept from him.

July 4th 2006

I caught David making out with Sara Tibalt at Don Wheeler's party tonight. He's broken my heart. All I wanted was for him to love me the way I love him and he doesn't. I don't know that I should have given my virginity to him. I think that he planned to have sex with me and then get rid of me once he had his thrills. I am going to pray that he feels more for me than just lust. Please, please, I want him to love me.

July 20th 2006

Dear diary, David confessed his love for me tonight. It inspired me to forgive him for making out with Sara. I really believe him and he sounded so sincere. After he apologized we made love in his car at Indian Gardens. It was amazing and I never knew that I could feel the way I do when he's inside of me. I hope I marry this boy. . .I really do.

August 1st 2006

I was really sick this morning. I think I have some kind of flu. David has been great to me though and I think things are really going to be great this year. Wow, we'll be seniors. . .can you believe it? I'm so excited. I tried talking to David about maybe going to the same college in the fall last night. He didn't seem too enthusiastic about it but I think that's because he doesn't plan on going to college. I told him he should think about it and he said okay. Then we made love in my room after my parents went to bed. He did things to me last night that I can't describe in words.

August 10th 2006

I can't seem to kick this flu. But it doesn't matter because David loves me and that won't go away, the sickness will. I'm really getting excited to see all of my friends at school next month. It'll be great and cheerleading practice is about to begin. I don't think my dad likes David much. He made a new rule that permits David to be at our house only until ten o'clock on weeknights and midnight on weekends. I guess he's just being protective.

After reading these entries and a few more Richard's rage began to spread out of control. He asked the Lord to suppress his anger and to help him make the right decisions. He could feel that the Lord wanted him to do something

about this but he could also feel that what the Lord wanted him to do wouldn't suppress his anger. Richard knows that taking the matter into his own hands is wrong but he doesn't care, he wants this done his way. [change tense?]

And so he did. Richard followed David around for a few weeks learning his patterns, his hangouts and his friends. David never caught on to Richard. He would go to his friend's house. He would go to "Abby's Diner" and meet up with his buddies. Nothing out of the ordinary was happening with Richard's dear friend Mr. David Miller. Until one night, he'd dropped a boy off at home and then headed out of town toward Indian Gardens where he parked the car and started walking down a trail. Indian Gardens is a wildlife reserve about five miles outside the town limits in an isolated forest. A lot of the town's youth go there to let their hair down with a few cases of beer and some grass.

Richard parked his car as well, a bit farther south than where David parked his car. He followed David from a far distance and nearly lost him a few times. But in the end he found him inside the tree line, next to the lake. He was standing above a mound of dirt and Richard knew right away that his baby girl was buried underneath that cold unmarked grave. In that moment nothing mattered, not God, not Sherry. The only thing he felt was rage. It took everything in him not to run over there and kill David on the spot. He didn't. He sat there and cried until the tears stopped coming. David was sitting down against a tree talking to himself. Richard silenced his grieving sobs and listened. He was barely able to hear what David was saying but what he heard hit him like a nail through Christ's wrist. David spoke to Jules.

"I'm sorry Jules. I'm so sorry but I couldn't do it. This was the only way, you see. . .I couldn't be that," he said as he looked down at the cold mound of earth.

What couldn't he do? Richard asked himself. Was there something more to the puzzle? Richard listened to David as closely as he could.

"When you told me about the baby. . .I couldn't help but. . .freak. I mean. . .me, a dad? How would that have worked? My future would have been ruined. I could kiss off college and you said you wouldn't go through with the. . .you know?"

That's all Richard needed to hear. He drove to the small Watertown police department with tears streaming down his face. He didn't know what to tell his wife Sherry and he dreaded telling her that her baby girl had been murdered. Richard dreaded even more that this little son of a whore, David, had killed his grandchild in his act of selfishness.

Richard pulled up in the parking lot of the police department and watched as the on-duty officers shuffled through the doors and into the small brick building. He couldn't bring himself to get out of the car. The police would just arrest David, process him and then give him a light sentence. That was fine as far as the law was concerned but what about the people that mattered, the people that loved Jules? Richard's rage was beginning to take control.

Many hours have past and it is dark now. Richard is walking about a mile outside of town. His tire blew and his car slid into the ditch of the highway. He knew he should have changed the tire when the bald spots started getting too thin but he's a procrastinator and it didn't occur that he'd be in the dilemma that he's in now. The howling wind is beginning to redden his face but he doesn't care, Richard is changed, he is different. Richard is empty.

The first mile of the walk was actually refreshing and he was in need of some exercise anyway. The cold night air was good on the lungs. Breathing had become much easier since he quit smoking about three months before Jules had gone missing.

Richard can see a pair of headlights in the distance and wonders if it's someone he knows. Maybe they'll give him a ride back into town. As the headlights grow closer Richard watches the car swerve over the centerline of the highway. He wonders if maybe the driver has had a few drinks.

The last thing Richard remembers before waking up in the ditch with blood caked to his face and in his nostrils, making it hard for him to breathe, is if the police have found his car down the highway pulled off to the shoulder. He wonders if they've discovered the remains of David Miller in the trunk neatly placed in four plastic trash bags that Richard bought at Wal-Mart earlier this afternoon. He put David's legs in one bag, two arms in another and his torso in the third. He double bagged his head.

After sitting in front of the police station earlier that night, after hearing David's confession to his daughter's grave Richard thought to himself about the current judicial system. He wondered if there was any way the system would somehow botch the case and set David free. He couldn't let that happen, he wouldn't let it happen. So Richard went home to tell his tale of tragedy to Sherry and to his dismay she wanted exactly what he wanted.

Sherry was always talking about how we must obey the laws of God and the laws of man equally but she, nor he, had ever been in a situation that would involve them on such a personal level. She didn't even want to go out to Jules' grave and make sure. She just said "take care of it. . .make it right."

Richard waited for David outside his house on this cold Friday night in October, tonight. The air was chilly as he pulled into the driveway. Richard got out of his car and approached David in a friendly manner. He told him that he'd been missing Jules and wanted to talk with him, to reminisce. Easily enough, David agreed and Richard took him to the place he knew she was buried.

Richard could see the fear in David's eyes when he took him to the gravesite and told him what he knew. He told David of the journal entries and of his investigation and about the theory he'd come up with. David could see that Richard intended to harm him so when he tried to run. It took Richard all of five punches to render him unconscious. The cold air made his knuckles ache as they pounded into David's face. After he beat him, Richard dragged him back into the woods. After setting him against a tree, Richard went to his car where he grabbed his wood ax.

When he got back, David had come back to consciousness and was trying to crawl away. Richard's anger took the best of him and with each swing of the ax his rage was suppressed, even if only temporarily it felt good. He felt alive and so he kept going. David's screams didn't bother Richard in the least and the blood that splashed upon his clothes was refreshing. David died shortly after his left leg had come off but that didn't stop Richard. He wanted David apart. The way his soul felt.

Before tonight he'd only used the ax to chop wood for the fireplace in the living room. It was a nice fireplace that kept the family warm on cold winter nights. The Benton's used to gather around the fire and watch television, talk as a family. These were times when Richard would watch his little gang and thank God for what he had given him. Now he was using this piece of metal and wood for something much different.

A man's legs are easier to cut through than a hard block of wood. The mess was great but winter would come soon and that "icy three months" would cover his tracks. By spring the blood would have been removed with the thaw. There wouldn't be anything left to show signs of his great sin, his vengeance.

Richard burned his bloody clothes next to Jules grave and said his peace to her. He would take David's remains to another county where he would bury him in a far off place where no one would ever think to find him. At least that was the plan. Richard had already dug an eight-foot deep hole in the back woods of Dodge County, about thirty miles north of Indian Gardens. Eight feet would be deep enough that the animals wouldn't go digging for him.

Now, broken down and wrecked, Richard is freezing in

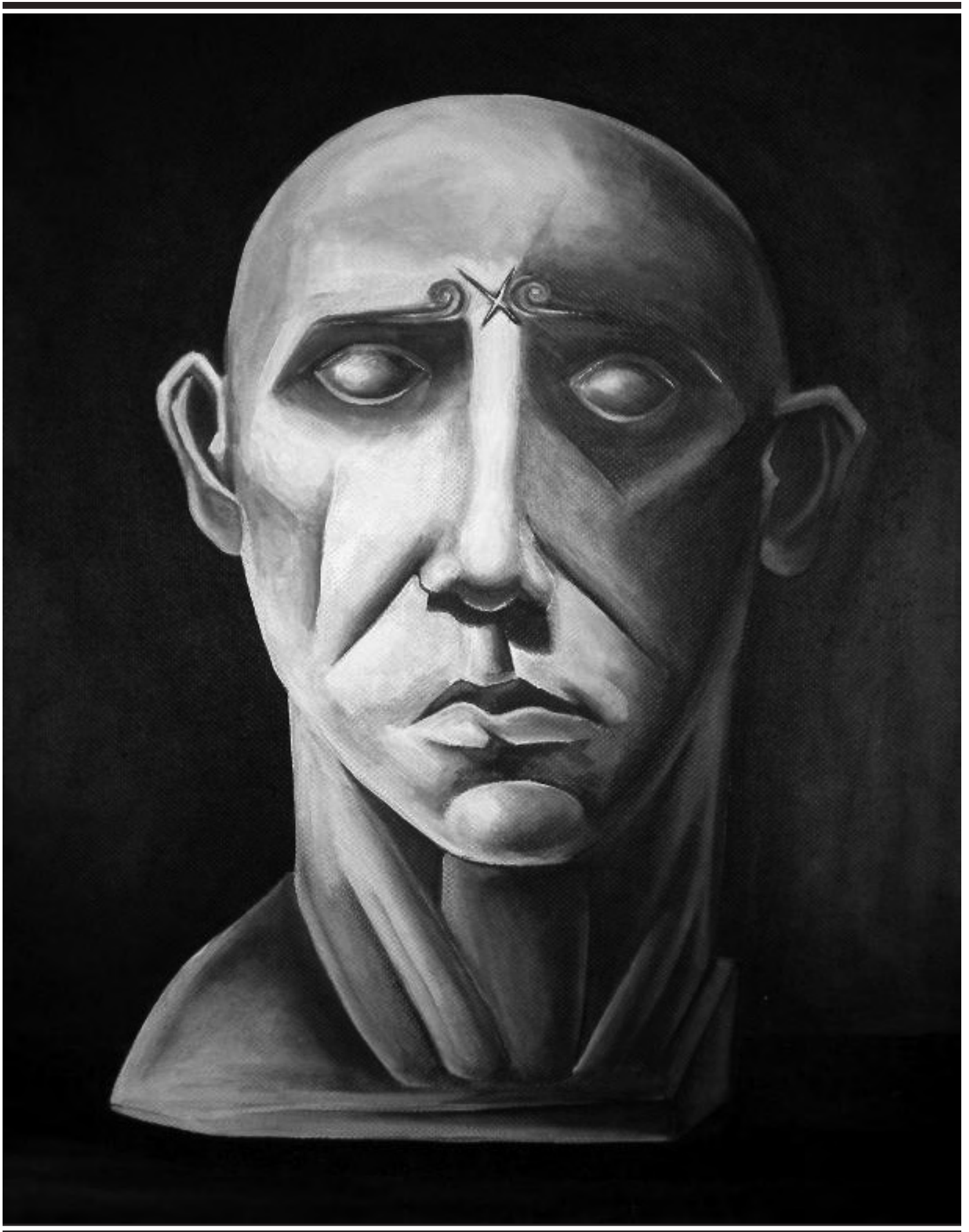
a ditch and there is no car in sight. It must have been a hit and run. He tries to move but can't feel anything below his neck. The only thought running through Richard's mind is "What next?" Are his sins too great to allow him through the pearly gates, or will the Lord understand and have mercy on him? He also wonders what his life would have been like had he just turned David in to the police and eventually found it in his heart to forgive him. He'll never find this out. He just hopes that he'll see his daughter when he gets to where he's going.



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BURIAL PARTY

BY GEORGE W. MORROW

ILLUSTRATION BY ADAM GILLESPIE

The vampire legend originated in southeastern Europe.

Vampires assume human form, but have no souls. They drink blood because it gives them life. Vampires possess hypnotic powers that force their victims to carry out their will. Vampires have enormous physical strength, and often feed on their own bodies.

COLONEL JOHN HILLMAN, United States Marine Corps, attended a White House reception in June, 1921. While there, he received a message from the office of Naval intelligence summoning him to a midnight meeting. The forty-year old officer, resplendent in his dress blue uniform, his chest decorated with medals, tendered President Harding his apologies and reported as ordered.

Admiral Skaife, intelligence chief, gave Hillman a cigarette and asked: "Colonel, do you believe in vampires?"

"No, sir."

"Know what vampires are?"

"Creatures who drink human blood. "

"Stand by, colonel. We have one in the Marine Corps. Ever hear of Captain Martin Reemey?"

"Isn't he the officer who went berserk and killed his men?"

"It's even more gruesome than that. I'll brief you."

Hillman smoked his cigarette as Skaife related events of 1918. Captain Reemey commanded a company of Marines during the battle of Belleau Wood. He suffered a nervous breakdown and killed 35 of his own Marines. Reemey ate the dead Marines and drank their blood. Reemey disappeared, and the Marine Corps eventually declared him a deserter. The Graves Registration Service discovered Reemey's body in the vault of an abandoned French monastery in February, 1921, and readied it for shipment back to

America. Naval intelligence got word, and ordered the body returned aboard the battleship "USS Portland." Naval authorities wanted a post-mortem performed to discover the cause of Reemey's bizarre behavior.

"Follow me so far, colonel?"

"Yes, sir."

"The 'Portland' left Le Havre six days ago, and was expected in port day after tomorrow. However, we received a wireless from the 'Portland.' Let me read it to you:

'Electrical system failing. We have no heat or ventilation. Crew is ill. Ten men missing. One officer committed suicide. Gunnery officer warns of possible explosion in powder magazine. Send help immediately. There are strange voices in passages . . . ' The message ends there. That ship is in trouble. It's position is roughly 600 miles south of Newfoundland. We have ordered the destroyer 'Van Buren' to rendezvous with the 'Portland.' I want you to fly out there, and find out what's happening."

"What does the admiral make of the situation?"

"I don't know exactly, but I want you to have a look at Reemey's remains. They should be locked within a coffin. His body is probably badly decomposed, but I want the pathologists to have a look at it. We've got to find out why he did such things."

"I'll do my best, sir."

"I know you will. Here is some background reading on vampires. The gunnery sergeant outside will fit you with gear. Good luck, and wire us when you find out what's cooking.

Hillman met the gunnery sergeant in the hallway.

"Colonel, I was at Belleau Wood, and saw what Captain Reemey did. I'll give you my crucifix, sir, it will protect you."

Several hours later, Hillman arrived at a country estate outside Washington. This mansion of red damask receptions halls and lakes inhabited by graceful swans belonged to one of America's wealthiest and most influential men.

Pamela, a tall, red-haired beauty, waited for Hillman in a garden cottage. She undressed him, and they lay in bed.

"Where is your husband?" Hillman asked.

"Arthur is in Europe. He won't be back until next week."

"I have to go away for a few days."

"What for?"

"It's top secret."

"Is it dangerous?"

"Of course."

"Why don't you get out of the Marines, John? You're

eligible to retire."

"What else could I do? Being a Marine is the only thing I know."

"A Marine leads a dangerous life. I couldn't live if anything happened to you, John."

"I thought that way when my wife died of influenza, but life goes on."

"I've thought about asking Arthur for a divorce, but he would never give me one. It would ruin his social standing."

"We will have to be content on having a superb extra-marital affair."

"Gossip is that President Harding fathered a child with a younger woman."

"I wouldn't be surprised if the President has troubles later on. Some of the men around him are unsavory."

"John, do you hear something outside?"

"No."

Pamela opened the door and walked on the balcony.

"Find anything?"

"No, but I had the strangest feeling we were being watched. Ouch! I pricked my finger on a thorn."

Pamela sucked the blood from her wound. "Blood has the strangest taste, John."

Hillman traded his dress blue uniform for a flyers suit, and read the information on vampires while the crew readied the plane.

The vampire legend originated in southeastern Europe. Vampires assume human form, but have no souls. They drink blood because it gives them life. Vampires possess hypnotic powers that force their victims to carry out their will. Vampires have enormous physical strength, and often feed on their own bodies.

A crucifix or other holy relic may provide protection against the vampire's power.

A Marine corporal reported the aircraft ready for flight. Hillman read the last line of the report: "A vampire can be killed by plunging a sharp object through its heart."

Hillman commandeered the corporal's bayonet as he left.

Hillman flew a six-seat, four-engine seaplane, the Curtiss NC-4, at a speed of 90 miles per hour. The radio operator kept in constant contact with the Navy department. Four hours into the flight, Hillman received a message from Admiral Skaife:

"Destroyer 'Van Buren' reports seeing 'U.S.S. Portland' explode. Wreckage is on fire. 'Van Buren' unable to pick up survivors. Awaits instructions. Proceed to site and find remains of Captain Reemey."

The NC- 4 reached its destination at dawn. The "U.S.S. Portland" was a 17,000 ton battleship, equipped with the latest armaments. Its observation tower reached 100 feet above the water, and the ship carried a crew of 1100 sailors.

The sea carried a light swell, and the water sparkled under a blue sky. Flotsam and wreckage filled the waters. Thousands of dead fish floated belly up, reflecting the result of a huge explosion. Hillman witnessed other naval disasters, but this proved unique. Hundreds of dead sailors drifted in life preservers. Normally, dead men's faces appeared peaceful, but these visages contorted in anguish. Their swollen faces bulged with lips thick and puckered.

Hillman wired Skaife:

"Have reached 'Portland.' No survivors found. Send destroyer 'Van Buren' to site as soon as possible."

Hillman cruised around the area, searching for signs of Reemey. An iceberg floated nearby, and he taxied over to it. The iceberg approximated the size of a baseball diamond.

Hillman left his crew in the plane and explored the iceberg. He came upon a crevasse, and discovered what he looked for. A steel grey coffin with a tattered American flag covering it lay half buried in ice. Hillman dug away the ice with his bayonet, but as he did, an overpowering fatigue afflicted him. He could barely move his limbs. He laid back to rest, and heard voices, the voices of men in agony.

"Save me, God, from Golgotha."

"The Lord is my shepherd . . ."

Then, came the horrible cackling of witches. Hillman relived the horrors of battle: rats devouring human corpses; Martin Reemey devouring his own Marines. A red fog appeared and encased the iceberg in a blood-red shroud. Hillman could smell the odor of rotting human flesh. The coffin lid opened and a man stood before Hillman. He towered six feet over Hillman's head, and wore a black gown. His skin exuded a deep, ruddy color, and his fingernails reached half a foot. His grotesque smile exposed a set of razor sharp teeth. The bony fingers caressed Hillman's face then slid down his throat and massaged his carotid artery.

"You know who meets you, Colonel Hillman?"

"Martin Reemey."

"Two Marines on a lonely island of ice. Heartwarming."

"Never in my wildest dreams would I have believed this."

"Welcome to my home, Colonel."

"I am here to take you back to the United States, to stand trial for murder."

Reemey let out a shout loud enough to blot out the sound of the ocean.

"I am a child of Satan. He found me dead, and restored me to life. I drank his blood and received immortality. I do his will."

"I am going to kill you myself, Reemey."

"My father has told me to go forth and make disciples of the earth. This I cannot do in my form. I must make converts. Drink of my blood—eat of my flesh. Become immortal."

"Go back to hell!"

Reemey stretched out his arm and cut off his hand.

"Drink my blood!"

Hillman attempted to plunge his bayonet into Reemey's heart, but the vampire's hypnotic gaze destroyed Hillman's willpower.

"Behold, Hillman. All the world lies before you. You shall want for nothing. Return to your Pamela, carrying her husband's head in a hat box. After you have his fortune, kill her and stand beside the rulers of the earth. You will cause a world wide economic depression. There is an Austrian corporal who has great plans for Germany. You shall help him. There is no power greater than Satan. Drink!"

"No! God, help me!" Hillman felt himself being pulled toward Reemey, but he became powerless to resist. Hillman held no control over any function of his body or mind. He slept until evening then returned to his aircraft to find his crew asleep. He crept up on each man and slit his throat, drinking the blood as it poured out.

He wired Skaife:

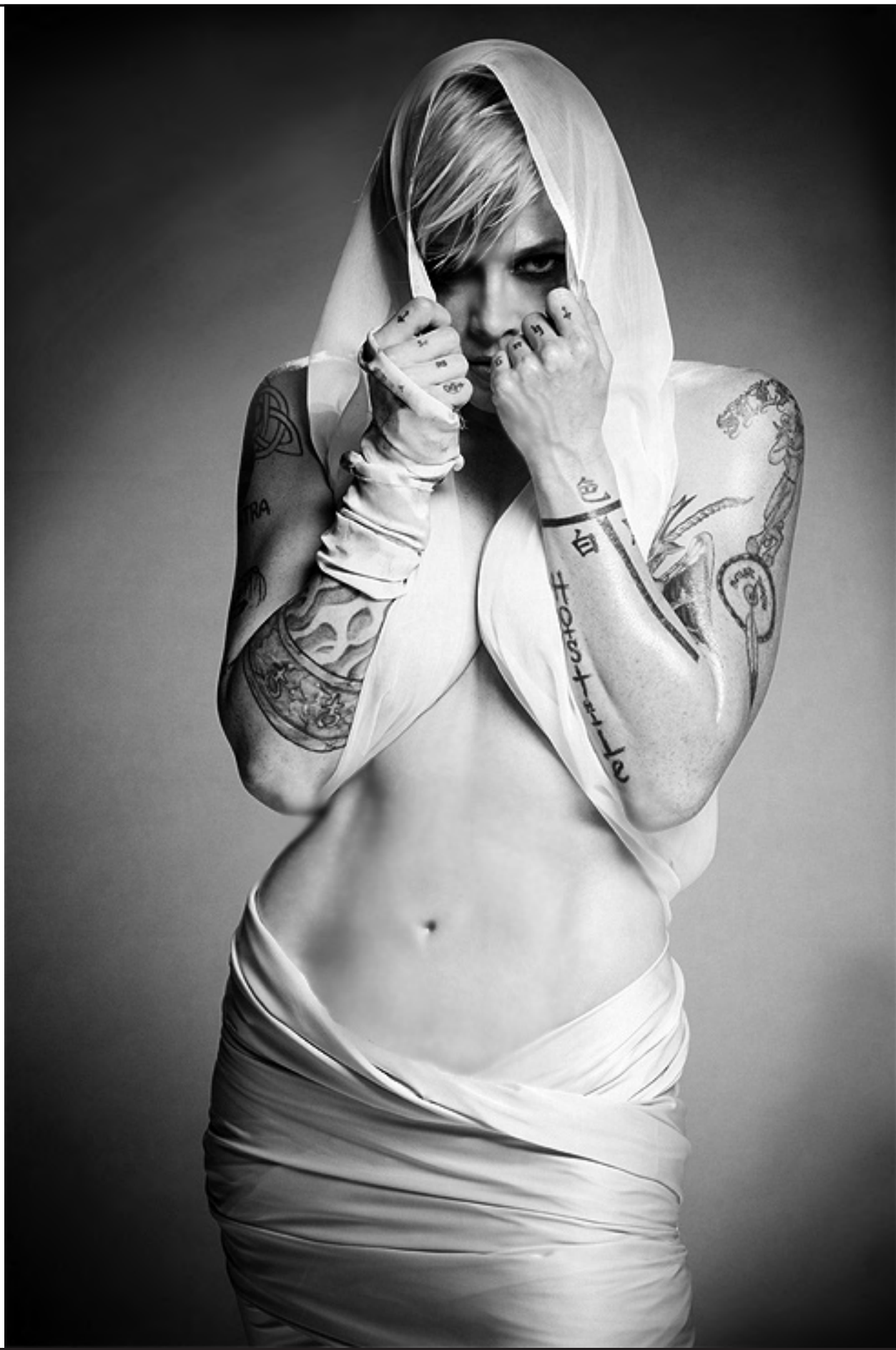
"Reemey's body not found. My crew killed in accident. Will submit full report after return."

Hillman lifted the plane into the sky and took a cigarette. The entire world lay before him. He drew out a cigarette, and reached into his pocket for a match. Instead, he pulled out the crucifix and remembered.

"What does it profit a man to gain the world and lose his soul."

For that one instant, Hillman beheld the events of the future. The next moment, he plunged the bayonet into his heart.





OTEP

INTERVIEW BY JEFF WOODWARD

Last month, I had the privilege of speaking with singer/poet and artist Otep, on the phone. She's a woman with something to say, and believe me, she knows how to say it. Otep is no minor leaguer, as she delved with well researched knowledge into religion, politics and history. And her music is pretty cool too. . .

PHOTOS PROVIDED BY OTEP

Jeff Woodward: Hello Otep

Otep: Hi How are you?

JW: Thank you for taking some time to speak with us

O: No Problem, no problem

JW: You're a Doors fan, right?

O: Yes I am

JW: Say you get a call from the afterlife, you know, saying it's Jim Morrison, and you can ask him one question. What would you ask?

O: Well, I don't know, that's a good question. There's like ten thousand questions I would like to ask him, I don't know if I could ask him just one.

JW: He was a poet before he was a singer, and I think you both have that in common.

O: Actually I think he was an actor before he was a writer. He did a lot of school plays and such before he became a writer. He is definitely an inspiration for me. I would probably ask him if he's happy. If I could ask anything I would probably ask what happened the night he died,

and then probably "what's it like"? (laughs)

JW: (laughs) You're a (Jack) Kerouac fan, right?

O: Indeed I am brother

JW: I was reading one time that he took a one inch strip of paper and taped it together and made a 125 foot long piece with it so he could he could just continuously keep going at it. . .

O: Yeah

JW: What do you do to help with the writing process?

O: I use anything that's available actually. I write on anything and everything I can get my hands on, if it's at a restaurant napkins, receipts; poetry books, the kind that were popular with Van Gogh, and several other people as well.

JW: Alright. Your newest album, Ascension, deviates from your previous albums Sevas Tra and House of Secrets..

O: Oh, you think it does, do you?

JW: In a positive way. There is much more melody and vocal range from you.

O: I don't like the word "deviate", I prefer evolution.

JW: Sorry, Otep

O: That's ok (laughs). Deviate sounds like we've gone off course, but I don't believe we've gone off course. We're ascending, hence the name (Ascension), exactly the way we're supposed to, and in the proper process we're supposed to, but I do understand your point and I agree with you. It was a conscious effort to try and bring something new to this record, as I tried to do to with House of Secrets from Sevas Tra, to bring more melody to it.

JW: Back to House of Secrets, every time I listen to it I hear something different

O: right

JW: a different sound, maybe a whisper in the background. "Sepsis" from House of Secrets is my favorite song on there..

O: Right on. That's a song that "J" (Evil "J" McGuire, bassist) and I wrote together. "J" wrote all the guitar parts, and we both wrote the composition and arrangement on it. We're thinking about bringing that to a live set. We've never, ever played that song live.

JW: Wow

O: I think we're about to bring it to the forefront for the audience.

JW: That's good. At the beginning of the song (Sepsis), is that Sumerian(language) that you're saying?

O: It is indeed

JW: When you say, "I will pull down the gates of Abaddon" and so on,

I believe that is something relative to Judeo-Christian beliefs, or even Babylonian before that, is that right?

O: The song centers around ancient Babylonian beliefs, indeed, "Sha Nagba Immuru" is the opening line for the epic of Gilgamesh and it means, "the one who saw all". Tearing down the gates of Abaddon, Abaddon is the ancient name for hell, and it's probably one of the deepest and darkest, if you believe in this kind of thing. So the things that inhabit Abaddon tend to be extremely malevolent and chaotic.

JW: Do you like to read about different spiritual philosophies?

O: Yeah, you know, I do. I tend to read a bit about everything. I like filling my mind with wisdom.

JW: Do you ever find yourself comparing the similarities between them? You know, the different spiritual philosophies, if there was maybe at one time one common root that they sprang from?

O: I do, I mean everything pretty much started out as spiritualism, not necessarily religion

JW: Sure

O: But as religion progressed, you talk about the earliest tribes, it was all nature based, and indeed, the earliest representations of a creator was actually feminine. As people observed their surroundings, they saw life came from women, that babies are born out of woman. And that translated into how they were growing crops. They planted seeds into the earth, and out of the earth came life. So they calculated that; it seems to be apropos in my head, but I'm a feminist. Even in human biology all fetuses begin as female. So every human being that

has ever existed once started out as woman.

JW: Like the Earth Mother

O: Yeah. Back to point; I believe religion borrows and is inspired and influenced by other religions, especially if you are a smaller religion in a land that has a predominant religion. Perhaps you may disagree with certain aspects of that religion, yet, you like this other part, so actually what you are trying to do is assimilate your new followers into the same holidays because they're accustomed to celebrating this time of year. Perhaps you take these holidays as your own, and proscribe your own thoughts and mythologies to them, and I think that's what happened along the way. If you look back, the first winged angels appeared in ancient Babylon. And even a lot of these stories in the Old Testament are from Babylon, which predates Judaism, which predates Christianity, and also Zoasterism. In ancient Babylonia, even the creation myth; two people, there was a serpent involved, they were in paradise and were exiled into the wilderness. Even Noah's Ark, that story, aside from the ancient Babylonian story, there was a man who saved his community by building a large boat, an ark if you will, because of a great flood. That story was passed down to the Greeks, and eventually became part of Judaic mythology, or religion, however you see it. In fact, most scholars agree now that Christ wasn't born in December, he was probably born sometime in August. But because it was such an important holiday, an important festival in Roman mythology, Saturnalia, which was a celebration of the god Saturn, and was very similar to what we do now for Christmas; exchanging gifts, and even the holly

twigs and leaves. Those things stem from that Roman celebration. I believe it was Constantine who Christianized the Roman Empire, there were still so many people worshipping pagan gods, that in order to either demonize those gods, those ancient gods, and turn them in to monsters, like Pan, who we know now was a wilderness spirit. He was a friend to Dionysus and he was a satyr, hooves on his feet, the lower half of him was a goat. He had horns and he played a little flute and he really liked the ladies. Now we know our image of the devil comes from that, to get people away from worshipping the nature gods. Dionysus, who was the son of Zeus, who was killed, and ripped to pieces and brought back to life as a resurrection god, same as Osiris in Egyptian mythology, killed by his brother, ripped to pieces, brought back to life by his wife as a resurrection god, actually the first resurrection god if I'm not mistaken. So I think we see a common thread, and I think there are some really great stories and legends in there, as morality plays more than anything else; they teach you how to treat your neighbor, how to treat your family, how to live a decent, good life, without infringing on the rights of others.

JW: Aside from feminism, I saw you did and interview for PETA(People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals). How long have you been involved in animal rights?

O: Well, I've been a vegetarian for just about a year, and I guess I started working with PETA back in August. I haven't studied everything about them, but I know quite a bit, and I may not agree with everything PETA does, but in fact, they're overall position for the ethical treatment of animals, that's what PETA stands

for; People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, I wholeheartedly stand with them 100%, and I enjoy their positions, and I believe that they're right on what they do. I'm proud to be with them, and I'm proud to work with them, spreading their message of treating animals with respect. You know, honestly, I love meat, I love eating it, I just don't like the way they torture and destroy these animals just so that we can eat them. I think that we, as a cerebral and intellectual society, we should treat these animals with respect, and in fact maybe treat them as royalty, because they are giving us life. They are sacrificing their lives so that we may eat. Because we don't have food shortages in this country, and because you can walk down the street and buy a hamburger for a dollar, I think we don't really look at it that way, because it's so plentiful here. If people could see those PETA videos, the undercover videos, the way that the people who procure the animals treat them, mistreat them, scare them, terrify them and injure them just so that they can kill them and strip the skin of their bones so we can fry them up and eat them is detestable and indefensible. I don't know how anybody could stand for it. And so many people that want to continue to eat meat, but may have something on their conscience about it, write to your local leaders just to tighten legislation on the way these animals are killed, the way they are kept, the way they are fed. California just passed Proposition 2, I believe, which makes sure the cages that birds are kept in(have enough room, so) they can spread their wings. And the same thing with animals; they can lay down without touching the walls; they are not kept in their own filth and checked for diseases, and they are actually able to get outside and have

fresh air. You know, the difference is, you live in a world where you are part of the food chain. Say, you're stranded on a desert island, or you live in the rainforest, ok, you're part of the food chain, and you're going to kill an animal and you're going to eat it, and that's it. You're not raising this animal to be slaughtered, and if you do, you still treat it well, because that animal, it's flesh, is going to feed your family. We're raising them in these giant slaughterhouse conglomerates, where there's disease; they (the animals) are basically cannibals because they are fed ground up bits of unwanted meat, which is how we got mad-cow disease in the first place. And then beaten and tortured and prodded just so that they can have their lives stolen from them in terrible ways.

JW: Like that Kentucky Fried Chicken video that was smuggled out, yeah I saw that one and we stopped going there (KFC) a long time ago.

O: It's like I can't even imagine it. I mean I still miss, I still love the smell of it, my friends and family eat it, and I think, "I'll just have one bite", and it will immediately revert in my mind back to those images of those animals being tortured to death, and I just can't do it, I can't participate in that.

JW: Do you have any pets at home?

O: I do. I have dogs, and I love them, more than, probably I treat them better than humans (laughs)

JW: (laughs)

O: They provide me with so much joy, and emotional relief, that they deserve it.

JW: That unconditional love that they give you.

O: Yeah, that's just something that you can't manufacture, you can't replace with anybody else, you know?

JW: What kind of hopes do you have now for America now that we have a new leader taking office January 20th?

O: I mean, you know as soon as election night came, and we saw that we were free finally of the Republican, you know, corruption, and their repressive regime, it felt like a million pounds of weight which was removed off our shoulders. Nothing really has changed in the world, we still all have the same problems, same bills, same economic crises, but it felt different. Because you finally felt like we have someone at the helm that knows what they're doing, and might just be a little smarter. In fact, I was speaking to my brother today about all this, and how we, we continue to second guess Barak Obama's decisions, because we are so accustomed to having a president that's not nearly as sharp as most of us tend to believe we are. And it really feels great, it feels different, I'm very pleased, and hopeful for the future. I just feel different; everything about this presidency seems remarkable. His cabinet members he's putting together seem like an all-star team. It's people that have been in the game a little while, and they seem to support the progressive positions that we all are hoping will bring this country back to a position of power and glory, and really represent the America we all are in love with, and that dream that we all think is still out there.

JW: I think a lot of people are hoping for that, and hopefully everything is going to take a turn for the better

O: Yeah

JW: I remember a few years ago

there was a forum (message board) on your website, and there was a section on there where people could post problems that they were having, maybe at home or at school, kind of like a support group. Have you ever reached out personally to a fan who was asking for help?

O: Yeah, I do, I mean, we actually receive a lot of e-mails and messages to our Myspace, and I do, I do check the messages, we have other people that check them as well, but I do, in fact, read the ones that seem to be important, and I do reply. . . .Some people, and I think it's unfortunate, but some people bait, and I used to answer a lot of the emails, but a lot of people were just baiting me with these made up fabrications of these tragedies in their lives, which weren't true. They were just trying to get me to reply to them. I found that so disingenuous and offensive actually, so now there's a little bit of research done before I would do that. One of the greatest things is reaching out to soldiers in Iraq. I get a lot of messages from them thanking us for standing up for them, for speaking out against the illegal and incompetent war in Iraq. They've done an amazing job. And just because we're anti-war, against this war, doesn't mean that we don't want justice, doesn't mean that we don't want (Osama)Bin Laden caught, doesn't mean that we don't want to put down the Taliban and all that. We just wanted, liberals like myself, justice for what happened, not to go in and end old grudges. You know?

JW: Right

O: Going into Iraq was wrong, and as soon as I saw it I knew. I was hoping they would level Afghanistan. I was actually hoping they would drop a

couple of big bombs on them, and leave it just a glow in the horizon for the next hundred years, as a constant symbol that you don't, you don't do that to civilians. You have a military problem, you take it out on the military, or some other way. You don't attack American civilians. More often than not, the citizens of America, if they are privy to a tragedy, a genocide, or a holocaust or an attack, we tend to stand up to that. And even if it's people we may not necessarily agree with, we'll still help them. But you come in, and you hurt us, our natural response is to hurt you back. And unfortunately, we had an idiot president at the helm who sent troops to a war that made no sense, absolutely no sense.

JW: But you know they were looking for WMD's didn't you?

O: Right. WMD was. . . I'll tell you what WMD was, it was not in Iraq. I knew he was lying because he didn't want Iran to invade (Iraq). He was probably just trying to scare Iran with it. Iraq, by the time we went in there, was a defeated regime. It was done. It was a silly thing for us to do. We should have gone in and captured the people that hurt us, and that would send a much bigger signal, than to go in and attack another country, another Arab country, and cause more enemies. We should have went after the people, we knew where they were . . . I mean the Taliban left Afghanistan, they moved into Pakistan, and they've been there very comfortably for the last 8 years. What I hope to see, and even a lot of soldiers want to see, they want to fight, they just want to fight the right war. They want to fight the right enemy. I hope to see a military effort pushed into Afghanistan, and into Pakistan if necessary, I know that's taboo, because Pakistan is supposed

to be a friend, but if they're not going to do the job, we're going to have to do it for them. Because we're the ones that were hurt. Once again I agree, we have such an amazingly smart president now, and he's building an incredibly gifted cabinet, that we're going to be able to get the people that hurt us, and hopefully set a standard in the world that we live by, and that hopefully influences other people that we're not going to make those stupid mistakes again, at least not for a very long time, I can't say (never)again, cause we did it in Viet Nam, Iraq, same thing. It's going to be a minute before we do something like this again, and that our response will be swift, and our response will be aggressive.

JW: Do you think with Obama in office America will focus on genocides like in Darfur?

O: I would hope so. I hope we can focus on Darfur, I hope we can focus on that entire region.

JW: Are you in between tour right now?

O: I'm driving home for the holidays.

JW: Your last tour date was at the end of November. You all starting again after the holidays?

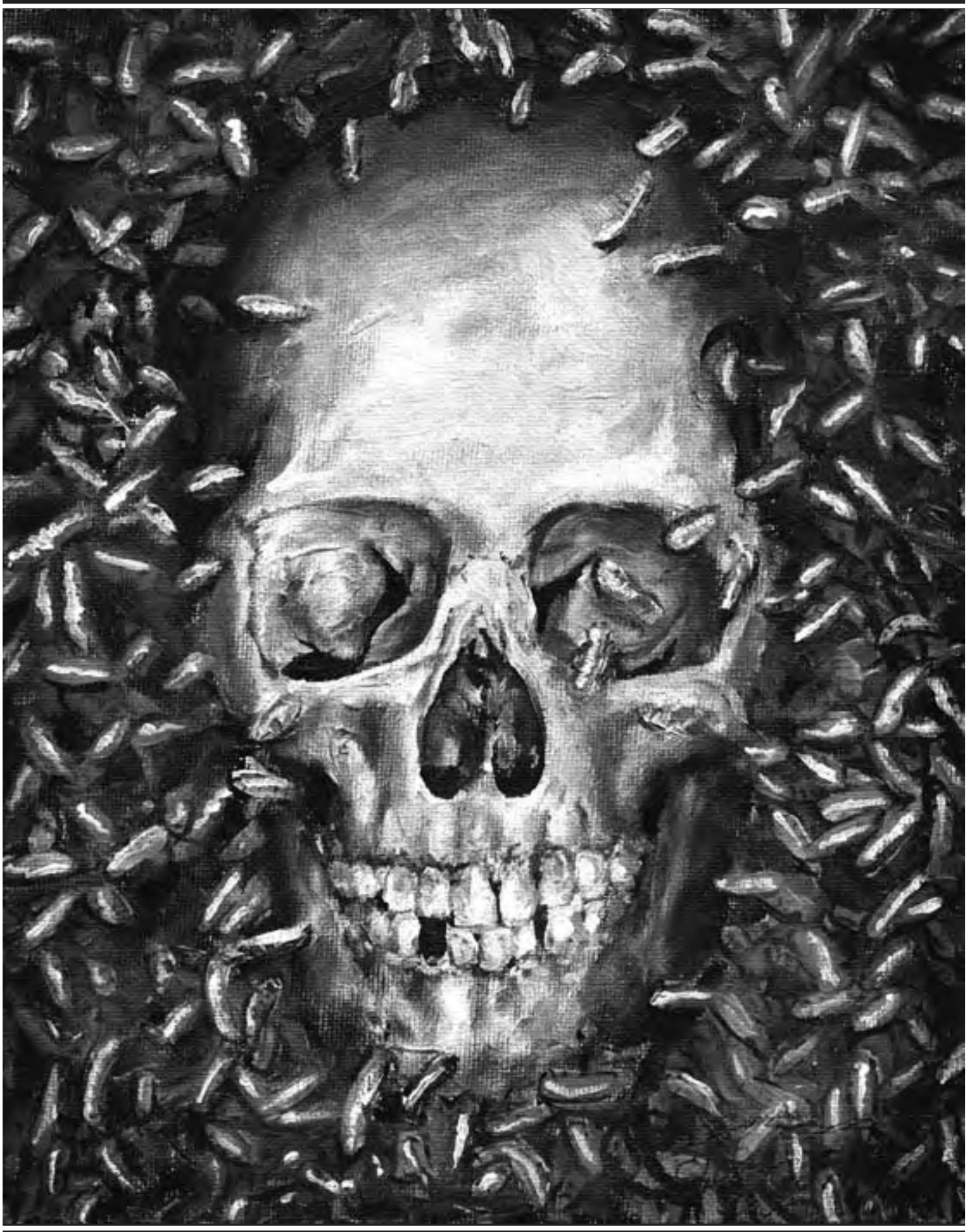
O: Indeed. We're supposed to go to South America sometime early next year, and after that I believe another North American tour, and then possibly Europe sometime after that.

JW: Ok Otep, thank you for your time

O: No Problem



Otep's current album, Ascension, is available nationwide, wherever music is sold. Check the band out at www.otep.com to catch the latest news on the tour, her music and the causes she is supporting.



MAGGOTS

BY JEANI RECTOR

ILLUSTRATION BY CLINT CARNEY

“The cone shaped fly larva uses its specialized mouth parts, including hooks, to pierce the skin. Then it uses saliva to digest flesh and to suck up the liquid, just as adult flies do. When the skin decays and ruptures and body fluids permeate the surrounding area, maggots will finally move off the body. The end result to a dead body left outside is not much.”

“I’M HERE TO TELL YOU ABOUT MAGGOTS.”

The man behind the podium never seemed to stand still. He shifted his weight from foot to foot and sometimes he took a step or two, moving forward and back. His hands waved through the air to give his story emphasis. His manner was animated, alive; which was ironic since this man’s profession was the analysis of insect activity after death.

He looked into the auditorium at the university students that comprised his audience. The Forensic Entomologist was a guest speaker and the subject was forensic science.

“Since our topic today is the very important task of establishing time of death of a crime victim,” the man began, “I want to give you an overview of the cadaver as an ecological system. For this talk, I will outline the details of an actual case upon which I recently worked.”

He started the story. “The flies were the first to find the body.”

He noticed with satisfaction that many students leaned forward in their seats. Always grab them right from the start, the Forensic Entomologist thought to himself.

“Picture this in your minds,” the man continued. “Just minutes ago, the body had been dumped in the forest.”

Now she lay, still and silent, on top of brown, decaying leaves. The summer sun

was just beginning to rise, but its light did not yet penetrate through the forest canopy overhead. The dead woman was hidden in the shadows.

His eyes traveled over the students who were watching him intently in return. "No one had discovered the body yet. No one knew she was dead, except for the killer. But the flies knew."

The Forensic Entomologist heard a collective gasp from the audience, and he paused for effect. Taking a leisurely step or two away from the podium then back, he faced the students once again.

"They were blow flies," he told his audience, "and these insects located the dead woman within ten minutes after the body was discarded."

Landing upon natural openings on the body, the flies immediately began laying eggs in the nose, mouth, and eyes. In another hour, the flesh flies arrived.

"Now, flesh flies," he told them, "bear live maggots."

Within eight hours, the body was stiffening with rigor mortis. Within thirteen hours, the entire corpse was rigid. The dead woman lay on her back, facing the sun, which now shined overhead. Half-open eyes revealed clouded corneas that stared without sight through the bushes.

The blood, no longer circulated by the heart, began to settle on the underside of the body, which created a purpling of the skin called livor mortis. The result from livor mortis was that the back, buttocks, and the back of the legs became permanently darkened once the blood clotted in the tissues. The temperature of the body lowered, cooling at a rate of one and one-half degrees Fahrenheit per hour.

Within twenty hours, the blow fly eggs began to hatch. The blow fly maggots, in the first larval life stage called instar, began to consume the moist, soft tissues of the body. These maggots in turn attracted ants, beetles, and small wasps that preyed upon the maggots, not the flesh of the victim.

The Forensic Entomologist stopped speaking because there was movement in the audience. He watched with interest as a few students, ashen-faced, made their way towards the exits. When those students left, the man faced those who remained.

"Within twenty-four hours," he continued without acknowledging that anyone had left, "the body became bloated with gas as bacteria became active."

Within thirty-six hours, the body was once again limp and pliable as rigor mortis reversed and the stiffening of the limbs disappeared. The gasses escaped and the bloating withdrew. The fly maggots molted into the second instar stage at fifty

hours. The body stopped cooling because the frenzied activity of the insects heated up the corpse once again.

The fluids from the victim were seeping into the soil beneath, and there would be no re-growth of vegetation in that spot for over a year. The body began to dry out and hide beetles and millipedes began to arrive.

Within one hundred and fifty hours, the third instar maggots ceased to feed on the flesh of the victim. They began leaving the body, crawling in squirming white masses across the leaves on the forest floor. They would find a secluded, dry spot away from the body to pupate.

By the seventh day that the body was lying on the ground in the summer heat, the dead woman was decomposed and appeared unidentifiable.

"When this woman was found, nobody could determine the time of her death. But the insects could."

A hand rose from the audience. "Dr. Mason," a young student said, "I'm Sheila Watts, and I've read your book. You've explained that insects are very predictable in their behavior. Could you talk about that?"

"I could, if we weren't out of time," Dr. Mason said. "Don't worry, I've been invited back to speak here next week. I'll finish up then. See you all next week, and now, I'll turn the class back to your professor."

Mason packed up his paperwork and walked out of the classroom. But he hadn't gotten very far down the hallway when he heard his name called. Turning around, Mason saw the person calling his name was the same student that had asked about insect predictability.

"Class is dismissed," Mason said with a smile.

"I know," Sheila said. "But I really want to know more. Is there any way I could come and see your lab?"

"My time is limited," he told her.

"Here, take my number and call me when you have time. Any time. I'll come to your lab."

Mason took the card, but made no promises. "We'll see," he said. But he was thinking, *There is no way I am going to invite a woman to be alone with me in my lab. That could be suicide.*

And so he left the college, and made his way home alone.

On the drive back to his house, Mason remembered things he had done in his past. And that night he had a nightmare, the same one he had been having a lot, as of late.

He dreamed of maggots; squirming through dead flesh, and they were eating their way into a bloated state

and then molting. After the molting, the maggots were larger, and able to consume even more of the putrid flesh of the cadaver. The remaining flesh of the body sank into the skeleton and even those remains began to disappear into the digestive system of the white worms.

Always at this point Mason would awaken, the sweat streaming down his forehead and soaking his underarms. He didn't know why he had the same dream over and over again; and understood even less why he should feel a sense of dread when he woke from it. Insects, in all of their stages, were creatures that he respected and even admired. Why should he dream nightmares about them?

Flies and their offspring were the recyclers of the world. Without flies, the world would be overcome with rotting corpses and animal excrement. Flies were a necessary mechanism of the world's ecosystem. Simply put, flies cleaned up messes in every stage of their development, but especially when they were maggots.

He stopped thinking about the dream. Instead, he lay in bed, alone, wishing for a partner. He felt horny, and was restless in his bed until he gave in and got himself off. He didn't like doing that; masturbation was messy. But he had made a vow to stay away from women and on this morning and he had needed some sort of relief.

So Mason spent his day writing research papers, keeping his mind on his work; but by the time the next morning arrived, he felt the same sexual urges as he had felt the morning before.

What was the answer?

His thought drifted to the pretty young college student whose business card he knew he still had in his wallet. Should he call her?

Against his better judgment, Mason's barrier broke. He knew it was crazy to have an attraction for a college student half his age because it could land him in big trouble.

And then he thought, *I may be a P.H.D., but I'm also a man. A very human man. Lord help me, because I am about to commit professional suicide. I am going to call Sheila Watts and invite her into my lab.*

He decided he would keep it on the up-and-up.

No you won't, a voice whispered in his head.

Yes I will, he stubbornly told the voice.

And so he rifled through his wallet until he found Sheila Watts' phone number, and called her. As Mason expected, she was happy to hear from him and delighted

to come to his lab. Today.

He would keep it professional; they would discuss insects, and he would have a woman's company, no sex involved. To hear a feminine voice, to be able to see her youthful face, and to appreciate a curvy figure would have to be enough.

Mason knew that the last time he had invited a young woman into his lab, things had become complicated, and he had almost gotten in trouble. But he also believed that he had learned from his mistake, and would not repeat it ever again.

So he felt buoyant; confident. He opened the door to his lab and let the young college student inside, and greeted her with a smile.

Mason tried to see his lab through a newcomer's eyes.

Inside was a desk that was piled with papers around a computer. There were in and out baskets on the desk, just like any other office.

But there were differences, too.

Hanging on a chain attached to a metal pole was a human skeleton. Along one wall was a waist-high workbench and next to it rested an adjustable-height stool. On the bench were two types of microscopes; the first was the "dissecting" microscope that worked best for viewing entire specimens, while the second was the "compound" microscope for higher magnification.

On a shelf in back of the bench were empty plastic vials, and several books on insect identification and ecology. There were assorted other things such as latex gloves, pins, and forceps.

Next to the bench was a door that was closed, and next to the door, a cabinet had drawers labeled with what seemed like foreign words.

"The writing on those labels are the insect genus and Latin names," Mason told Sheila, reading her expression. "I keep the preserved specimens stored there, and in my notebook, I cross-index them by date and case number. I have all that in my computer database as well."

"Wow," she said.

Mason felt proud that he could impress her. "Would you like to sit down?" he asked, drawing them both a chair. "What exactly is it you want to know about insects?"

When she sat, Sheila said, "I'm doing a college thesis on insect behavior. I am particularly interested in maggots."

"Wonderful!"

She looked at him oddly. "You're the first person that I've ever known to call fly larvae wonderful."

"They are valuable creatures in so many ways," Mason said. "Unfortunately their reputation does not live up to their usefulness in the world."

He lifted a small, wide-mouth screw-top glass bottle from the bench and handed it to Sheila. It looked like it could hold about a pint, and inside were ten hard cocoons that resembled small footballs.

"I found these near a dog's body. I figured that these flies took at least six days to go through the entire larval development stages upon the body itself, then from one more day in this pupae state away from the body," Mason said. "So from the fly evidence, I knew that the dog had been lying on the ground for seven days."

"That's unbelievable," Sheila appeared amazed.

"Not unbelievable. That's predictable," he said. "You'd be surprised at how accurate forensic entomology can be."

"But what about before maggots pupate?" Sheila asked. "What do maggots do to a dead body?"

"I'll tell you," Mason said. He wanted to get some sort of reaction out of Sheila, so he continued, "The cone shaped fly larva uses its specialized mouth parts, including hooks, to pierce the skin. Then it uses saliva to digest flesh and to suck up the liquid, just as adult flies do. When the skin decays and ruptures and body fluids permeate the surrounding area, maggots will finally move off the body. The end result to a dead body left outside is not much."

"How do you know all of this?" she asked.

"I'm an expert," he told her. "I've seen it happen."

While he was talking to her, Mason watched her expression carefully. He could tell she was impressed by his knowledge, and obviously admired him. Was she sexually attracted to him as well?

Don't find out, the inner voice whispered. Leave her alone.

I can't leave her alone, Mason's mind answered the voice. I have to have her.

"I'll bet you're a quick study," he said. "I could mentor you."

"You would do that?"

He studied her, deciding. He was encouraged to see that she appeared eager and hopeful. Her eyes were big and her expression was wistful, wanting. . . .wanting what? Wanting him?

But suddenly Sheila changed the subject. "What's behind that door over there, next to the insect cabinet?"

He felt irritated. It had been going so well. "Just one of my experiments."

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "Can I see?"

"No," he said bluntly.

She looked deflated. "Oh."

Now Mason really felt angry. Obviously she wasn't what he had hoped for. He decided he had no time for her. "I think you should leave now."

She looked at him in surprise. "Just like that? Wait, I thought you said you wanted to mentor me."

"I've decided you aren't worthy. Now please leave my lab."

Suddenly Sheila looked just as angry as he was. "How dare you call me not worthy? Who the hell do you think you are?"

And she jumped up from her chair, and ran to the door by the cabinet. Before Mason could react, Sheila grabbed the door handle and pulled it open. Mason finally rose from his chair, but too late to stop her. She swung the door wide and looked past the door into the next room.

And just as suddenly, she turned back around to face Mason with a look of horror on her face.

"You should have left when you had the chance," Mason told her.

"I can leave now, please," Sheila said. "I won't tell anybody, I swear. Please, just let me leave. I won't tell a soul."

"I already explained that you had your chance. Now you have no chance."

Sheila made a run for the front door, a burst for escape, but Mason caught her as she went by. She struggled in his grasp, fighting and kicking. She started to scream and he shoved his hand roughly over her mouth to silence her. She bit his hand and he cursed with pain, removing his hand. She started to scream again and he started to punch her face to shut her up.

But she was a wildcat, and Mason became aware of the difference in their years. Sheila was young and strong, and he was middle aged and winded from cigarette abuse. He couldn't seem to keep his grip on her; she was almost elastic, and kept slipping out of his grasp.

Suddenly she pulled away from him. In desperation, Mason tried to grab her once again. He only managed to get a handful of her shirt, and he could hear the material rip as she escaped.

He lunged after her, but she was quick, so quick. . . .she reached the front door ahead of just out of his reach.

He knew when she pulled it open, he had lost her.

And so he stopped, standing in place; watching her run down the walkway outside to her freedom.

He was resigned to his fate. He knew she would go to the police and now it would be all over for him.

But he wanted one more look at his maggots first.

Mason walked across the floor to the door next to the cabinet that Sheila had left wide open. He stood there, gazing fondly into the next room.

He loved flies, in all of their stages. But he especially favored the maggots. Maggots did such good for the world. He had been working with them for a long time, and had become very fond of them. It was almost as if they had become pets to him.

And so he stood in the inside doorway, watching the white worms squirm in and out of the body of the last woman he had let into his lab. She, too, had been alone with him in the lab, and now she resided in a bathtub, being devoured; being recycled. She was food for his maggots.

His maggots had to eat, didn't they?

But now it was all over. He knew what he had to do next.

And so Mason went to one of the drawers in the cabinet, the only drawer that was not labeled with an insect genus. Inside that drawer was a pistol.

He carefully tucked the pistol into a coat pocket, then carried the coat out to his car. He would drive out to the country, hide his car, then walk as far into the woods as he could.

Then, when he found an elusive area where he knew he wouldn't be discovered for a long, long time, he would shoot himself.

And he would become food for his beloved maggots.

Mason would be recycled.



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THE AWAKENING

BY KENNETH E. HERRITT

ILLUSTRATION BY PETER COENE

EAGER TO PROVE HIM
WRONG, I WENT OVER
TO THE NEWSPAPERS
AND OPENED THEM UP,
CHECKING FURTIVELY
FOR THE OBITUARIES IN
EACH ONE. NORMALLY
FULL OF NAMES I HAD
NEVER KNOWN, THE
ONLY ONES I COULD
FIND WERE THE THREE I
HAD WRITTEN ABOUT.

MY EYES WERE FIRST OPENED IN A SMALL BOOKSTORE, where Avenue J met Eighth Street. Filled with musty old books to the ceiling, this was the place I fell in love with the world of words, unaware of the power they held within.

Silas Banks, an elderly man with wire-rimmed glasses, sat quietly at his desk. Always eager to fill my craving mind, it startled me when he suggested I put words of my own to paper. For years I had toiled in college, all for naught, as the writings I sent out were always sent back to me with empty refusals. And here sat Silas, asking me to give it one more try.

That night, I went home and sat up for hours, writing a story of an old woman of many hats. Poetic verse flowed like fire from my fingertips, spinning a whimsical tale that would make any human smile, but I was about to discover Silas was anything but human.

The next day I took my inspiration to him, certain he would approve. Pulling his glasses from his age-ridden face, he scanned down through the pages making a few barely discernable grunts as he seemed possessed by the chorus I had unleashed upon him. However, my moment of elation wouldn't last. For when he finished the last sentence, he tore the sheets down the middle. That, in itself, tore through my flesh. He then gathered the halved sheets together and tore again, ripping away at my bones. He then continued on, tearing at the remnants until they looked much like confetti and scattered the pieces to the breeze, dispersing what remained

of my soul.

The timing was right for me to run away but my feet stood firm, unable to move. Old Silas wasn't through with me yet. With his glasses now removed from his face he leaned forward and let out a whisper that rung soundly through my ears.

"Look around you, boy. For the past ten years you have come into my store to read of the greatest sorrows, the most hideous crimes, and the most terrifying catastrophes. Never have I given you a book filled with a happy thought. You have any idea why that is?"

I nodded my head, uncertain of the answer he was looking for.

"The first day you walked in here I thought you understood. You read all my books without me once charging you or asking you to leave. I saw potential in you, boy. You read the words and understood the cruelties. You understood what good writing was all about. Tragedy, sadness, despair, you read of them all because that's what people do. They want to read of a life far worse than their own, so they can tell themselves how much better off they are."

The question surfaced in my mind. "What do you want from me?" A silence filled the room as I realized I had spoken it aloud. If only I had let it go, but perhaps, the question had never been my own. A thought given to me to lead me down the path I would follow, but at the time I could not know. Regardless, I posed the question, and waited an eternity for my response.

Silas rose from his chair, allowing his cane to lead him through the bookstore. As he passed through each section of books he read off a name and threw it to the floor.

"King."

—*bang*—

"Rice."

—*bang*—

"Koontz."

—*bang*—

He then stopped and shook a lecherous finger at my face. "Your mind has been shaped by the greatest minds to ever live and you see it fit to enter my sanctuary and offend me with . . . with this serendipitous piddle about some old lady who wears too many hats! It's no wonder you can't sell a story to save your life!"

I stepped back as Silas approached, but the hook of his cane faltered my escape. "Listen here, boy, I'm going to do for you what I never did for the others. I'm going to give you a second chance."

Paralyzed with fear, I stood there as Silas hobbled back to his counter. From underneath he pulled out a pad of paper and a pen. "Take these. Write me a real story. Write

me a story that's so ghastly it produces a blood-curdling scream from my throat."

"You want," I stammered, "You want me to write a story about somebody being killed?"

Silas sat back in his chair and slapped his cane across the desk, allowing a calm smile to pass across his face, "Now that, my boy, is the start of a wonderful idea. Think you can have it for me by next week?"

With my mind filled with purpose, I promised it would be on his desk the next day. I then rushed out to find my inspiration, never realizing it would find me.

A drunken hooker sat in the alleyway next to my house. Intoxicated to the gills, she grabbed my arm letting out a few indignant shouts of what an incorrigible bastard I was for not looking her way. Why should I? She was no more than an extension of the garbage that littered the streets. Someone who would never be missed. I would immortalize her plight, using my hatred toward her kind as fuel for my story.

Inside my apartment, I crawled over my bed to reach my desk. Pushing aside the many books of a wasted college education, I sat down with the pad Silas had given me, allowing the pen to mold between my fingers. Feverishly possessed, my hand wrote thoughts as they spilled from my mind, as the desperate last moments of an alleyway hooker were lay out on paper. Killed by her own John, in the style of Jack the Ripper, it was a fitting death for a woman who offered nothing useful to society. Pleased with what I had written, I slept through the night and nearly past the next day. Surprised at the late hour, I rushed out, hoping to catch Silas before he closed.

Inside the bookstore, Silas was placing out new books when I interrupted him. Seeing one of the books I had been waiting for I stretched my hand out to grasp it, but he briskly knocked it away with his cane.

"Why do you care to busy yourself with the works of others when you should be busy writing your own?"

I held out the manuscript for Silas to see. "Twenty-three hundred words of the best you'll ever read."

Silas nabbed the pages from my hand and grumbled as he read them over.

"Well?" I asked, "What do you think?"

Silas rubbed a spot of perspiration from his brow. "It shows you have potential, but I think you can do better."

"Better? How so?"

"The death of a prostitute is hardly a horror story. Her life ended the day she took to the streets. To feel the anguish of your story, I need to read about a character whose death is meaningful."

I held out my hand, willing to take the story and rework it, but Silas folded the story and placed it in his pocket. "I

said it wasn't a horror story; I never said it wasn't worthy. The gruesome way your villain tore into her flesh brought life to my old bones, and the details with which you described her torment—absolutely ghoulish.” Silas paused to scratch his nose. “However, for true horror to be felt, we need to be horrified for the victim.”

“So, what now?”

“Grab yourself a newspaper. From there, you should gain plenty of inspiration.”

I left the bookstore, uncertain of where I stood. Macabre feelings pounded through my heart, as I viewed wretched nightlife filtering out of a club, oozing out the toxicity they had just imbibed.

A man and his wife nearly knocked me over as I stopped by the newsstand to grab the daily paper. A few obscene gestures given by both labeled me as the fault for their inability to walk a straight line. I passed them by, not wanting the confrontation, never realizing our paths would meet again. At the corner of Eighth and Barbary is where I found them, driving a black sedan. The scum and his wife nearly ran me over as I tried to cross the street. They might have noticed, had they not been too busy arguing with each other. Shouts of obscenity raged through my mind, but I held them in, as they had given me the fruit I needed for my next story.

* * *

Back at my apartment, I laid the newspaper on the bed. The red flash of the answering machine caught my eye.

“Julian, it's Erica. I've been waited here for two hours. Call me. I'm worried about you.”

The park . . . In all the excitement, I had forgotten. She had called the night before with some important news, saying how she wanted to talk to me personally. Things had been sour for a long time, but she managed to hang in, waiting for things to turn better. Change was in the air. I wanted to call her and give her the news, but not until I had met with the kind of success that could be physically measured.

With the red light still flashing, I pressed the button again.

“Mr. Fayt, this is Roger Jamison, the Dean of Kensington College. I would like to meet with you to discuss your current lack of academic progress. Please call me before Friday or I will assume you have formally withdrawn.”

‘Lack of academic progress?’ So, that's what they called it when a student failed to show up for class. Little did the man realize, I was doing him a favor by allowing an empty seat for a more attentive student. The endless lectures. The ominous piles of books. I had become a slave to my craft,

and broke my bonds to free my soul. If only Dean Jamison could understand.

Two messages in three days time. This spoke much of my interactions with others. Hidden amid the shadows of the city, my existence was negligible, but I had a story in my mind that could change all that.

As I sat down before my typewriter, the couple in the black sedan took precedent in my mind. I closed my eyes and watched them careen through the streets of West London in a drunken stupor. Without need to stare at the keys, I allowed my hands to float over them and type out the scene, incorporating all the details that would make the scene real to the reader. Increasing in speed, chaos was winning over control as the vehicle sped through one intersection after another. One obstruction in the wrong place. That's all that was needed to end this race to death, and in this instance the vehicle of choice would be a gas truck, stalled out at Eighth and Barbary.

I saw their hands raise up to their faces as death loomed brightly into their eyes. There was never a chance to hit the brake, as the sedan crushed itself against the steel of the gas truck, causing it to erupt into an inferno.

Had that been the end, the story would have grown dull. No, there was more. The couple somehow emerged from the sedan. Patrons from Carper's watched the two flaming torsos slam themselves to the ground, attempting to put out the flames. Unable to assist, they could only peek through their fingers in horror as the couple reduced to cinders before them.

Satisfied with what I had written, I turned my attention to the newspaper. At the top of the page, I read how Scotland Yard had foiled the plans of several hijackers. Down toward the bottom, there was mention of a brutal stabbing. In an alleyway several blocks down the street, a woman had been brutally disfigured by a knife. It should have been top news, and would have been, had the women held a different profession. As it stood, only the savagery of the murder prevented the streetwalker's fate from being relegated to the last page.

Though bereft of intricate details, it was much like the story I had wrote the day before. How interesting, I thought to myself, that real life had chosen to imitate my own writing. Perhaps, I had a latent psychic gift.

A sudden knock startled me.

“Julian? Julian, answer the door.”

“Erica?”

“Open the frickin' door.”

I crawled over the bed and opened the door. There stood Erica, her hair matted down with dampness. Looking out the window, I saw the cause. The gentle skies of earlier had given themselves to pouring clouds of rain. So engrossed in

my story, I hadn't taken notice of the abrupt change.

"Where's your umbrella?" I asked.

"I gave it to a homeless woman."

"You what? Why?"

"Since when do you care?"

Grabbing Erica's wet coat, I hung it on the back of the door and ushered her inside. "Look, Erica, I care. It's just . . . I've been under a lot of stress lately."

"I wouldn't know. You don't show up for class anymore, and yesterday you stood me up."

"That will never happen again. I promise."

Grabbing her by the hand, I led her to the couch and looked deeply into her eyes. "I'm truly sorry. Give me one more chance." I was working her as I had many times before. Thousands of apologies, each accepted by the next day. The magic never failed.

"Why should I?"

"Because you love me."

Erica looked across the bed then crossed over to the table, where she removed a page from the typewriter. Curiosity had already replaced her anger.

"What's this?"

I followed her across the bed, attempting to get the page from her hand, but she held me off with the other as she continued to read.

"This is seriously messed up."

"It's art."

"Art is a five year old boy smiling for a camera he can't see. This is nothing more than an advertisement for fire insurance."

I held up my hands, aware she was trying to provoke a response. "Why did you come over here?" Poor choice of words on my behalf, but I felt protective of my prize.

Erica moved across the bed and grabbed her coat as she reached for the door. "I came here to check on you, but apparently you're doing just fine without me."

The door slammed behind her, followed by several quick patters down the stairs. I considered following, but thought it best to let her go. Erica always came back. That was her life story. Run away when the rage set in then come back with the soothing calm I needed. That's the way it had been since high school, and the game had followed us to college. She'd be back to accept all the blame and I would enjoy the physical apology that followed. She needed me as much as I needed her, but for the moment, all I required was sleep. Unceremoniously, I tossed aside an empty pizza box from the night before then pulled a tattered blanket over my body.

* * *

The next day, I set out to see Silas. Dressed in a tight brown sweater, he stood up to meet me as I walked to the counter.

"Do you have something new for me?"

"I most certainly do."

With great pride, I handed over my latest masterpiece. Silas's hands trembled as he read it; whether from excitement or old age, I couldn't tell. I watched him, studying his every response. It wasn't until he finished the last page that I opened my mouth to ask his opinion.

"A much stronger piece than your first, but still heavily riddled with bias."

"Bias?"

"You write of death as if it were some vulgar creature that swooped down from the sky to reap vengeance on the unworthy."

"What do you know of death?"

Silas tapped his cane sternly into the floor. "Much more than you, evidently." He pocketed the pages as he turned away from me. "I know that death is never judgmental."

"So what are you suggesting?"

"I'm suggesting you write a new story. This time I would like you to show death in its true light."

I opened my mouth to say something, but stopped when Silas held up his hand. "Come back when you have something new for me."

I nearly pulled the door from the hinges as I slammed it behind me. Two great stories, and both failed to impress. My mind wandered back to the headline I had read. Several 'what ifs' filtered into my mind. *What if there had been more hijackers? What if they were busy planning to hijack another plane? What if they succeeded?*

Back in my apartment, I started typing. The story flowed quickly from my hands, as they fought to catch up with the thoughts in my head. Details. Details. I already knew the plane was leaving from Heathrow, but I needed a destination. I turned on the television for inspiration, but all I could find were sitcoms and dramas. No matter, as the news would be on soon, providing the magic name I needed.

Leaving a blank to fill in, I pushed past it, moving my fingers along the typewriter with oiled precision. A ring from the phone briefly startled me, but I let it go, knowing the answering machine would silently answer the rude intrusion.

Six hours of typing, until I thought I was done. I then decided to check the machine.

"Julian, I know you're there. Pick up the phone. Julian! Fine, then don't. I wanted to talk things out, but I guess you're not interested. I'm heading out tomorrow on the seven am to Bristol unless I hear from you. Call me, if you

care.”

More melodrama. The constant threat of transferring to York College. She had pulled the trump card so many times it had lost all meaning. I’d return the call. She’d come over crying. The threat would later be exposed as a lie.

Not wanting to suffer through it all, I didn’t return the call. It was high time I give the young tart a lesson in manners. Teach her to be an adult. Show her that such shenanigans no longer worked.

It was then the thought hit me. York would be the destination for the plane and Erica would be onboard. I filled in the destination as the evening news started, but found myself startled by the first story to appear on the air. A younger couple slammed into a gas track on Eighth and Barbary, just moments ago. Why hadn’t I noticed the crash? Why hadn’t I heard the sirens? I had been in my own little world.

On the clock it said 10:30 pm. For a whole day I had slaved before my typewriter, unaware my story had played itself out blocks away. Looking back through the pages I had just written, a thought hit me. Silly superstition, but I was taking no chances. The destination of the plane would no longer be Bristol. Instead, it would be Blackpool.

Satisfied with my story, I lay down to sleep.

* * *

Pulling the sleep from my eyes, I rose to another day. The red light on my answering machine flickered away, but I disregarded it. No doubt it was Erica calling back to recant her threat; she could wait. Today was the day I would impress Silas. I was certain of this, as I strode confidently down the many street blocks that led to his store, with each step inducing more swagger.

“Ah, Julian, you’re back,” Silas said. “I do hope you gave some thought to what I told you.”

From my pocket, I pulled my neatly folded manuscript and pointed to it as I laid it firmly on the desk.

“This is the story you’ve been waiting for.”

Silas pressed the brim of his glasses firmly against his forehead. “Allow me to be the judge of that.”

A smile passed over the old man’s face as his eyes parsed through the pages. This was the reaction I had been hoping for, but self doubt set in, wondering if I had unintentionally wrote a comedy.

“You like it?” I asked meagerly.

“Like it? I love it. I think you’re finally beginning to understand what I’m looking for.”

“So, now what?”

Silas looked up from the pages. “You write more.”

“More?”

“Yes, that’s what writers do. You write until you serve your purpose, and yours is not yet served.”

“I . . . I don’t understand. You said you loved it. Please, tell me what I need to do better.”

Silas stepped out from the counter and came over to pat me on the shoulder. “You have the talent to become a great writer. I just need to know you have the courage to stick it out.”

“And how will you know that?”

“When the time comes, I’ll know. Now, go home and get yourself some rest. You look like hell.”

I walked out of the store with my chin to my knees. I had allowed the man to send me home without a fight. The long, quiet walk drained all the energy from my legs, leaving the rage and embarrassment behind. Back home, not to write, but to rest.

When I entered my apartment, I turned the television on then went to the bathroom to look into the mirror. Silas was right. My hygiene had fallen sharply. A greasy ooze that would have passed for motor oil covered my hair, and my body smelled of an animal from the wild. I had been so caught up in my work, I had forgotten the need for self maintenance.

Throwing my clothes aside, I leapt into the shower. The hot water felt like a blessing as it tore the filth from my body. It was a cleansing of the soul as much as it was a release from stress. Alone in my little world, it felt good to be embraced in the warmth of the water. I’m not certain how long I stood there, but it was the sharp contrast of cold water that brought me back to Earth.

Cold and shivering, I jumped out, becoming quickly aware of something big happening on the news. Wrapped in a towel, I sat on the bed as I brushed my teeth, with my full attention on the screen in front of me. The wreckage of a plane burning in flames. It was an awful sight.

I considered using the remote to turn up the volume, but that would just make Ms. Grasely start banging on the ceiling. Besides, the ticker on the bottom of the screen said it all.

‘Terrorists hijacked a plane at Heathrow Airport en route to Blackpool. The plane crashed just several miles outside London, with all presumed dead.’

From the corner of my eye, I saw the red light flashing on the answering machine. I had ignored it earlier, but couldn’t do so any longer.

“Julian, I’m sorry. I know you’re having a really rough time, and my antics aren’t helping any. So, I wanted to call to let you know I won’t be going to Bristol.”

A sigh of relief, but that wasn’t all she had to say.

“I’m going to catch a flight out to mother’s for a few days and I should come back a whole new woman. I’ll send her

your love and hope to see you in a few days. Love you.”

My heart sank as I remembered where her mother lived, just outside of Blackpool. Collapsing in a heap, I lay down on the bed, my night filled with the horrible screams of hundreds perishing in flames.

* * *

The next morning I went down to the newsstand, certain it was all a dream. The headline on the front page brought me back to reality, exerting more gravity on my already heavy heart. All the pieces fell into place. I wasn't predicting the news. I was writing it, and only one man could undo what I had written.

Breaking free at a strong gait, I dashed to the bookstore, slamming the door behind me to signify I had arrived. Silas laid a book down on the desk and adjusted his glasses, unfettered by my dramatic entry.

“I thought you were going home to rest,” he said.

Invigorated by guilt and rage I slammed the newspaper on his desk and pointed at the headline. “You killed them! You killed them all!”

Silas picked up the paper and read over the article. “I've killed no one. The credit all goes to you.”

Unable to control myself any further, I lunged across the desk and pursed both hands around his throat. “Liar! I had nothing to do with those murders!”

Silas moved his hands down to mine, plucking them gently aside. Inside his eyes, I saw an endless field of darkness. I tried to struggle against him, but the effort was useless, as he was able to counter my strength effortlessly.

Silas cocked his head to the side. “On the contrary, you did. Over there you will see a stack of newspapers from the past few days. Show me a person who hasn't died at your hands.”

Eager to prove him wrong, I went over to the newspapers and opened them up, checking furtively for the obituaries in each one. Normally full of names I had never known, the only ones I could find were the three I had written about.

“This is some sort of trick!”

The paper I had brought in was still on his desk. I reached up and snagged it in my hands and tore into it, looking for the latest list of deaths, but found none.

“Where are the names of the people who died in last night's flight?”

“They'll be posted over the next few days. Death is an orderly thing, you know. People need to confirm the identity of their loved ones, funeral arrangements need to be made, and then the paper gets notified of it all. My colleagues will be pleased to see you have worked out well,

just as I promised.”

“I'm not a murderer!”

“I never stated you were.”

My heart pounded strongly inside my chest, threatening to break out from the ribs that held it inside, and then nausea threatened to fold me to the ground. Had I become some sort of split personality, acting out my own fantasies? No, I couldn't go on knowing what I had done. I ran to the door with Silas screaming after me, but I knew I needed to purge the evil from my soul.

Running into the busy street, redemption came in the form of a city bus crushing me down to the pavement. Ethereal white light glowed all around me, bathing me in its purity. Until now, Heaven had been but a myth to me, but perhaps there was substance to that which I could never before touch.

A voice called out to me from behind, “Julian.”

I turned to see Silas, abating all hope I had risen to a better place. Anguished inside, I fell to my knees. “Please, leave me alone. Let me die.”

“I'm afraid I can't do that.”

“Why? Why torture me like this?”

“Come with me.”

Silas gently took my hand. A room slowly came to view, with doctors hovered over my body.

“Am I . . . ”

“Dead? Not yet. You're badly in need of mending, but that's not what I want you to see.”

Floating through walls as if they were fog, we stopped in a room where a woman was giving birth to a child.

“Why did you bring me here?”

“To show you the importance of what you do.”

I watched on as the woman screamed and the doctor pulled out a child. It might have been a beautiful moment, had the child cried when the doctor slapped its bottom.

“The baby. Is it dead?”

“No. It's waiting for a soul.”

“But it was already alive. If it wasn't, why would they be delivering it?”

Silas let out a soft sigh as he pulled his arm over my shoulder. “We are given life from the moment we are created, but we don't receive our soul until we are born.”

“But . . . ”

“I know. That's not what you were taught. It's good that you know different. If the truth were known then many children might never see their first day.”

“So, where does the soul come from?”

“You mean you haven't guessed yet?”

I nodded my head.

“From you. You see, there are only so many souls to go around. For someone to be born, someone must die. That's

where you come in.”

“So, I kill people to allow others to be born?”

Silas let out a small laugh as he squeezed my shoulder. “No, boy, nothing gruesome like that. You see, you write out death’s plan.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You would be the first, if you did. You see, back in the beginning I handled all the deaths. Everyone died in their sleep, and all was good. However, people thought little of life when they realized death was so pleasant, so I wrote up more drastic ends to their means, to make them understand the need to live on.”

“Then why do you need me?”

“Each generation bore a few more souls, allowing the number to climb. It wasn’t long before I found myself behind on my work and in need of people like you, to assist. You see, Julian, you are here to complete the circle of life, and now, you must fulfill your destiny.”

“How?”

Raise up your hand.

I reached up and felt a tingle as something white and ethereal wrapped itself around my hand. I tried to push it off with my other hand, but Silas stopped me.

“Take it to the child.”

I walked slowly over to the infant they had just set down in the crib. Cold, vacant of life, so difficult to look at. I turned my head to more trauma. Across the room, the nurses held the mother down as the doctor tried to tranquilize her.

“I want my baby! Give me my baby!”

Gently, I nuzzled the baby’s arm, allowing the soul to seep its way inside. I then stepped back, uncertain the magic had worked.

A cry from the crib brought the doctor full circle. A nurse raced to the child and nuzzled it in her arms to give it warmth.

“I don’t believe it. It’s a miracle.”

The nurse took the baby to her mother’s waiting arms, and cried beside her, overpowered by what she had witnessed. Tears fell from my eyes as well.

“So, what do I do now?”

“You wake up and continue your work.”

“And what about you?”

“Me? I need to move on, as I have plenty more assistants to replace. It’s sort of become my full time job.”

“Will we ever meet again?”

“We will, but not for many years. For, you see, I wrote your death plan myself.”

“How does my story end?”

“It ends with you as an aged old man, dying in his sleep.”

We returned to the room where the doctors continued to work on my body. Silas helped me up to the bed and gave me a warm hug before departing. The white light then softened, replaced by the shouts of doctors and nurses scrambling to bring me back to life.

“He’s back! He’s responding!” That’s all I would hear before drifting off to sleep. Three days of rest in their eyes, but to me it was three days of work. Passing through the maternity ward at a maddening pace, I brought the souls from the plane crash to the newborns, never knowing which one might have belonged to Erica.

On the fourth day I finally opened my eyes and requested a pen and paper. I had rested long enough and needed to provide souls for those yet to be born. Feverishly I wrote, of car accidents, cancers, and murders, personalizing each plan. I then took some time to reflect upon how a boy with no direction had grown to become a man with such a high purpose.

If only Erica could see me now.



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IN REVIEW:

THE DREAMS IN THE WITCHHOUSE

PERFORMED BY THE WILDCLAW THEATRE COMPANY

REVIEW BY JEFF WOODWARD

PHOTOS PROVIDED BY THE WILDCLAW THEATRE COMPANY

Through the generosity of Brian Amidei, managing director and member of the Wildclaw Theatre Company, we got a chance to see Wildclaw's adaptation of H.P. Lovecraft's horror story, *The Dreams in the Witchhouse*, performed at the Athenaeum Theater in Chicago.

We all know and love Lovecraft, one of the granddaddies of horror fiction. During the 1920s and 1930s, Lovecraft spun yarns that raised the nape hairs, and a few eyebrows, in an era when story telling was reaching a pivotal moment in American literature; the birth of the modern horror story, which fused science, astrology, folklore and magic into what we recognize as some of the basic ingredients for every horror story written today.

Dreams in the Witchhouse, as adapted, takes a small detour from the original story, but is faithful to the premise. Walter Gilman, a mathematically gifted young man who is tortured by dreams of geometrical shapes, receives an acceptance letter to a school in Arkham, a town with a history of infant kidnappings and witchcraft. During his stay there, his nightmares become reality, as he finds himself playing a crucial role on May's Eve, the witches Sabbath. . .

When we first entered the studio, I was a bit surprised at the size of the venue. The studio had a one hundred



person capacity, which meant that the audience had intimate contact with the theatre's members. There was no leaning forward to hear, or asking the person next to you what was just said. The acoustics and sound effects carried through the audience, washing over them over with the projected voices of the players. The special effects were well done, professional, and had a few people jump



in their seats. I took particular notice of two women sitting in the row in front of me. In the opening scene, an infant is sacrificed by a priest, leading to the premise of power the witch has over Arkham. The two women openly gasped. In today's visually dependant, non-stop action movie world, *Dreams in the Witchhouse* did an excellent job at catching and holding the audience's attention.

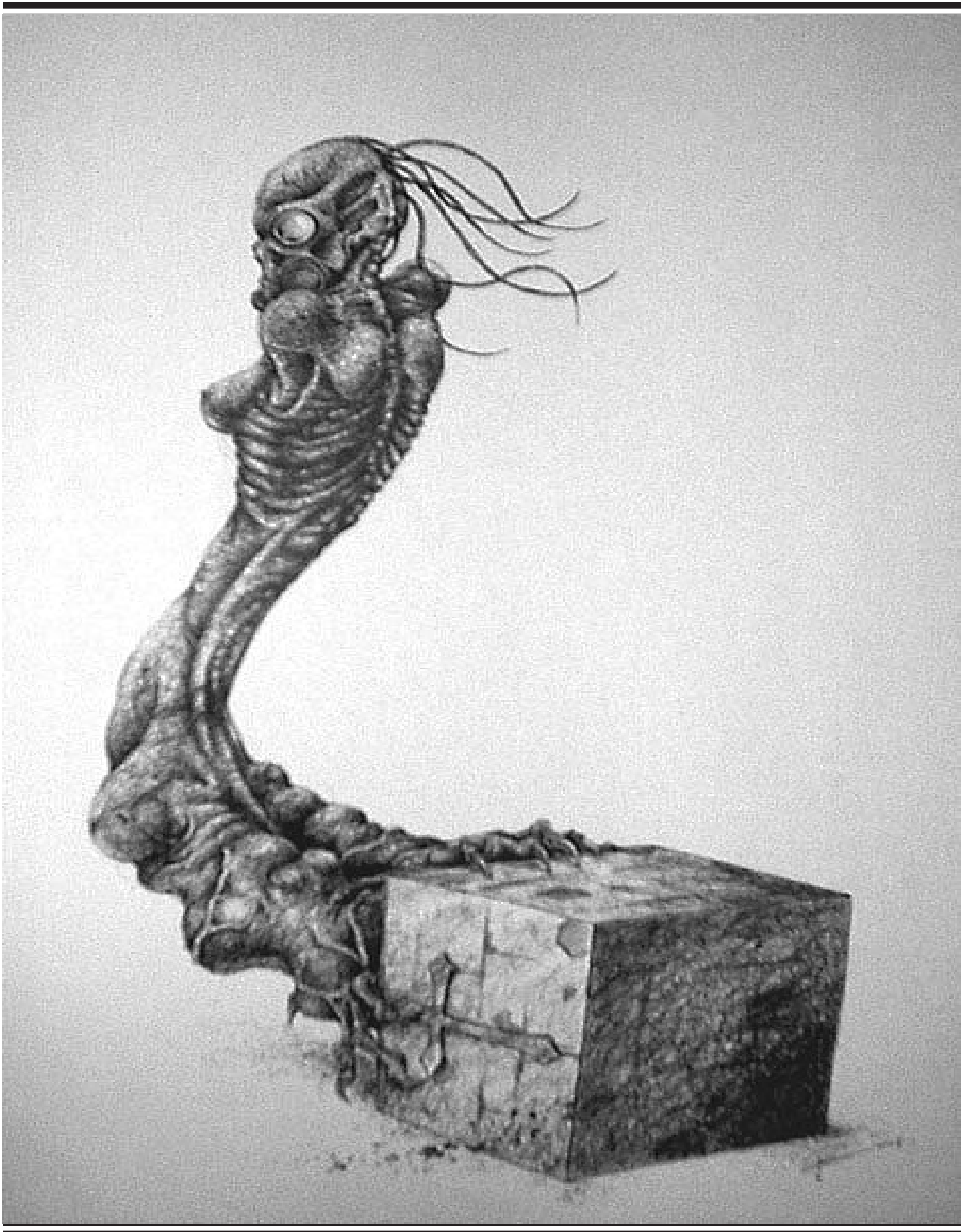
Tom Whittington was exceptionally wonderful as the gifted, but frail, Walter Gilman. J David Moeller lifted the dread on a few occasions with his well-played role of Maurewysz, a fellow boarder at the Witchhouse, who was trying to protect Gilman from evil. Casey Cunningham was excellent as Lillith, her voice screamed the fear and pain as she was almost sacrificed. Ryan Patrick Dolan, as Officer Malone, the father of newborn twins, held the audience's hearts, as he was torn between his feelings against the sacrifice, and later as one of his children are kidnapped. Kate Malone, whose one of many roles included that of the wife of Officer Malone, shocked the crowd, as she slashed her husband's throat with a spatula (this was one of the scenes when audible gasps were heard from the row in

front of us). Sean Bolger, as the librarian, was true to his post of defending the dreaded Necronomicon, even until death. Brown Jenkins, the "rat with the human face", or witches familiar, had me actually believing he was just that. The hisses, and half human speech that came from Ron was credible to the point of weirdness. Michaela Petro, who played the witch Kelziah Mason, was wonderfully beautiful and hauntingly eerie. Her voice would have domineered a man into complete obedience with the utterance of a single command. Brian Amidei, who played multiple roles, held the audience's attention with his richly deep, baritone voice. His role as Dombrowski, the landlord of Witchhouse, is unforgettable (robe, tighty whiteys, and thick rimmed spectacles will live in my memory for a long time). As Father Iwanicki, Brian had me believing he was *actually* going to sacrifice Lillith(well, maybe just a little bit). Lastly, Chris Hainsworth, as Sheriff Raven, convinced us (just as he did Officer Malone), that the sacrifice *had* to be made, in order to save the town from future infanticide.

Credit must also be given to Charley Sherman, the director and story adapter. The variances he introduced did not deviate from the story in such a way that it became unrecognizable. He did what very few others have done; he took an H.P. Lovecraft story, and adapted it to the stage, in and of itself a feat of genius.

The Dreams in the Witchhouse played at the Athenaeum Theater in Chicago through Dec 21st, 2008. For more information on the Wildclaw Theatre Company, including upcoming shows, please visit www.wildclawtheatre.com





THE BOX

BY MARC CICCARONE

ILLUSTRATION BY JEFF POWERS

HE TURNED THE KEY
OVER IN HIS HAND AND
LOOKED DOWN AT THE
BRASS LOCK. IT STILL
RESEMBLED A GOLD
MOUTH JUST WAITING
TO SWALLOW THE KEY
AND SPIT FORTH ITS
SECRETS. IT WAS HIS
LAST CHANCE TO TURN
BACK. THE MOUTH
SMILED.

LARRY SELLERS LOOKED DOWN AT THE OBLONG OBSTRUCTION that was now residing in his foyer. He gauged that the maple-stained chest was roughly 4 by 4 by 2 feet, but had no clue as to what could possibly be inside to make it so heavy. He had used all of his strength to push it into the house and now that the mysterious box was inside his home, an exhausted Larry wondered why he had found it sitting on his front porch upon returning from work. Staring pensively at the box, Larry racked his brain but could not come up with any ideas as to who would have left him such an object.

"It's got to be a mistake," Larry said.

Aside from the brass trim and latch the box was plain and looked like any other trunk that would be found at the foot of a bed. There was no return address listed, and he seriously doubt it was from a friend, and he was certain that he hadn't ordered anything.

The only marking on the entire box was a white square of paper taped to the top of the box, which read: PRODUCT QUESTIONS AND CONCERNS CONTACT 1-800-555-6185

That was all.

"Hello," a deep voice answered the phone.

"Hi. This is Larry Sellers, and I'm calling because I received a shipment from this company number."

"Of course, a customer," the voice came across very smooth and relaxed. "Are you pleased with your purchase?" there was a sense of amusement in the words.

"That's the thing sir, I actually didn't order anything. I think there has

been some kind of shipping mistake.”

“Wait,” the cool calmness of the deep voice vanished instantly. “What did you say your name was?”

“Larry Sellers.”

There was a click on the other line, and Larry assumed he was on hold while the employee checked his purchase records. A minute later the voice was back, and sounding a bit calmer.

“I’m sorry Mr. Sellers, your right. We’ve made a terrible mistake. I will send a representative to pick up the package, and I offer you our sincere apologies for your troubles.”

“Oh, it’s no trouble. Thanks for helping me resolve this.”

“Mr. Sellers,” the voice took a serious tone. “I must ask you for a large favor.”

“With the package?” Larry was confused.

“Yes. Unfortunately I can’t get a free dispatcher until late on the day after tomorrow.”

“That’s o.k. I can hang on to the box till then. I come home from work around five; can someone get here by then? Or I could just leave it outside the door if that’s easier.”

“No, no, please don’t do that. I wouldn’t want any damage to come to the package. Five O’clock is perfect. Someone will be there to meet you. But I must ask you to not open the chest. Since you called the number, I’m sure you already know that the key to the lock is taped underneath the paper. I’m already in enough trouble for improper shipping so if anything else goes wrong I could lose my job. This is why I must ask that you leave the package unopened.”

“Yeah, of course. I wouldn’t open the chest,” he quickly replied feeling somewhat sorry for the man. “After all it’s a government offense opening other’s mail, right?” He chuckled trying to add some humor with the last statement. Truth was he really had no desire to open the box anyway.

The man did not laugh. “Thank you so much. Our customers expect the utmost privacy. Our products are objects that are not always easy to obtain.”

“Right.” *Why is this guy beating the topic to death*, Larry thought. *I’m not gonna open the damn box.*

“Thank You,” he repeated. “As I said our products are unique to each client and privy only to them. If it got out that I made a mistake as drastic as the wrong address, it would ruin our business reputation with customers.”

“Listen, you can trust me. I have no reason to tell any one about the mix-up. Just pick-up the chest around five on Wednesday.”

“Thank you again,” the man said. And with that the strange phone call ended.

That night the maple chest remained on the rug by the front door. The next morning Larry went to work without giving the item another thought until lunchtime.

As luck would have it, Cindy Lee, from sector 9, was taking her lunch break at the same time as him, and decided to sit next to Larry. She was a cute young woman and had a lively personality and great sense of humor. She was the type of person who could make Larry feel like the only one in the room when she talked to him. Problem was she made everyone feel this way, and Larry doubted he would ever have a chance with a girl as special as her. However, he never gave up hope, and he was thrilled when she asked him how his day was going.

In truth Larry’s days were mostly repetitive and boring, but he wasn’t about to share that with Cindy. Instead he decided to recount the events of Monday, including the bizarre conversation he had with whatever company was responsible for delivering the mysterious chest.

“Pretty odd, huh?” Larry said finishing his story.

“Sure is,” Cindy replied. She had barely touched her turkey sandwich since he started. “I can’t believe he never once mentioned who he was, or what company he worked for. All this secrecy.” She shook her head.

“I know,” Larry smiled. He was eating up the attention she was giving him and never wanted the moment to end.

“You know you gotta open it?” Her eyes grew wide with the devious idea.

“Are you out of your mind. They’ll have me arrested.”

“Yeah, but who knows what your sitting on right now. It could be some kind of huge government conspiracy or something.”

“I seriously doubt that the government would make that kind of mistake with sensitive material,” he chuckled and shook his head at her nonsense. “I can’t open it.”

“Where’s your sense of adventure?”

“I . . .” he started

“Oh my God,” she gasped, “I read about something like this.”

“What?”

“People,” her eyebrows raised. “They’re selling people. It’s people! Or maybe just limbs and body parts,” she called out laughing. She loved to laugh and her smile was beautiful. “It happens all the time on the black market!”

“Knock it off,” Larry’s laugh joined her pretty giggling.

“O.k., but seriously, I don’t think I could resist taking a peek. Not after how bizarre the guy was. I would need to know.”

When Larry returned home the first thing he saw as he entered his home was the wooden chest. It sat on the rug with its brass lock staring up at him. The lock resembled a circular mouth just waiting to open. Cindy’s words spoke softly in his mind.

“They’d know,” he shook his head. “She’s crazy,” he told the empty house and quickly moved into the kitchen.

After dinner he quickly knelt beside the box and gave it

a quick smell check just to make sure there was no hint of formaldehyde or other preservative that might be used to store body parts. Of course there was no smell. The chest wasn't cold either so it was doubtful that there was a cooler inside for the "limbs" that had excited Cindy so much.

Larry retired to his comfy green recliner annoyed with himself for even thinking something so ridiculous. From his chair he gave the box one last look, then flipped on the T.V. and relaxed. He was so worn out that sleep took hold of his body before the ten O'clock news finished.

Larry awoke to a loud clatter. His head quickly swiveled from side to side. The T.V. was still on and in the dark it cast an eerie glow about the otherwise pitch-black room. The dark haze began to lift from his eyes as they adjusted to the room. He rose from the recliner and made his way to the light switch.

The light confirmed that the house was indeed empty. Despite his tiredness, everything looked the same, except the box. When his eyes fell upon the chest, it appeared to be several feet closer to the couch where Larry had been sleeping. He walked to the T.V. and shut it off.

I'm acting silly, he thought. It didn't move, it doesn't smell, and there's nothing illegal inside!

Yet he still couldn't shake the ever-growing feeling of curiosity. Cindy had been right, he had to know; and the longer the box remained inside his home, the more he wanted it opened. He wanted to know what was so important that no one besides 'the client' was suppose to see it.

Probably just porn! Maybe even a blowup doll, he guessed. If he opened the box, it would slate his curiosity, and at least he'd have something to talk to Cindy about tomorrow.

In a state of turmoil, he eventually decided to succumb to temptation. He slowly flipped the note over and stared at the silver key taped to it. He hesitated briefly, and then carefully began peeling back the tape; everything had to be kept intact. What seemed like an eternity was actually only two minutes. When the cold metal key finally rested in his fingers he exhaled deeply and realized that he had held his breath through the whole ordeal.

He turned the key over in his hand and looked down at the brass lock. It still resembled a gold mouth just waiting to swallow the key and spit forth it's secrets. It was his last chance to turn back. The mouth smiled.

What's the big deal, no one will ever know. Or even care!

Cautiously Larry slid the key into the slot. He turned his wrist and felt the soft click. He glanced around as if he expected someone to pop out and stop him, but of course there was no one. He slowly lifted the lid.

A bright yellow light began to seep from the open box. It was intense and obscured Larry's view of the inside. Unable to see, all Larry could sense was voices. There were whispers

in his ear although he was unable to make out any real words.

"What's happening?" he asked, transfixed on the pulsing light and sound that was reaching out from the box at him.

The light began to do more than just obscure his vision; it was starting to hurt. More than just hurt, Larry's eyes began to sting, and he quickly shut them. The protection of the eyelids did nothing to stop the pain and the burning grew worse. The burning culminated in twangs of pain that shot from Larry's sinuses to the stem of his brain. There was searing, throbbing pain radiating through his entire skull, and through it all he could just barely feel hot ooze dripping down his face which could only be from his ruptured eye balls.

After that moment, his brain was unable to analyze what was happening, and Larry eventually slipped away inside the dark abyss of his mind.

On Wednesday, as expected, two individuals gained entrance into Larry's house to retrieve the chest.

"Another one?" said the first.

"Of course," replied the second, and the obvious elder to his companion. "Could you really expect different results?"

The younger of the two shrugged his shoulders.

"That's nearly 90%, it's almost a sure thing at this stage."

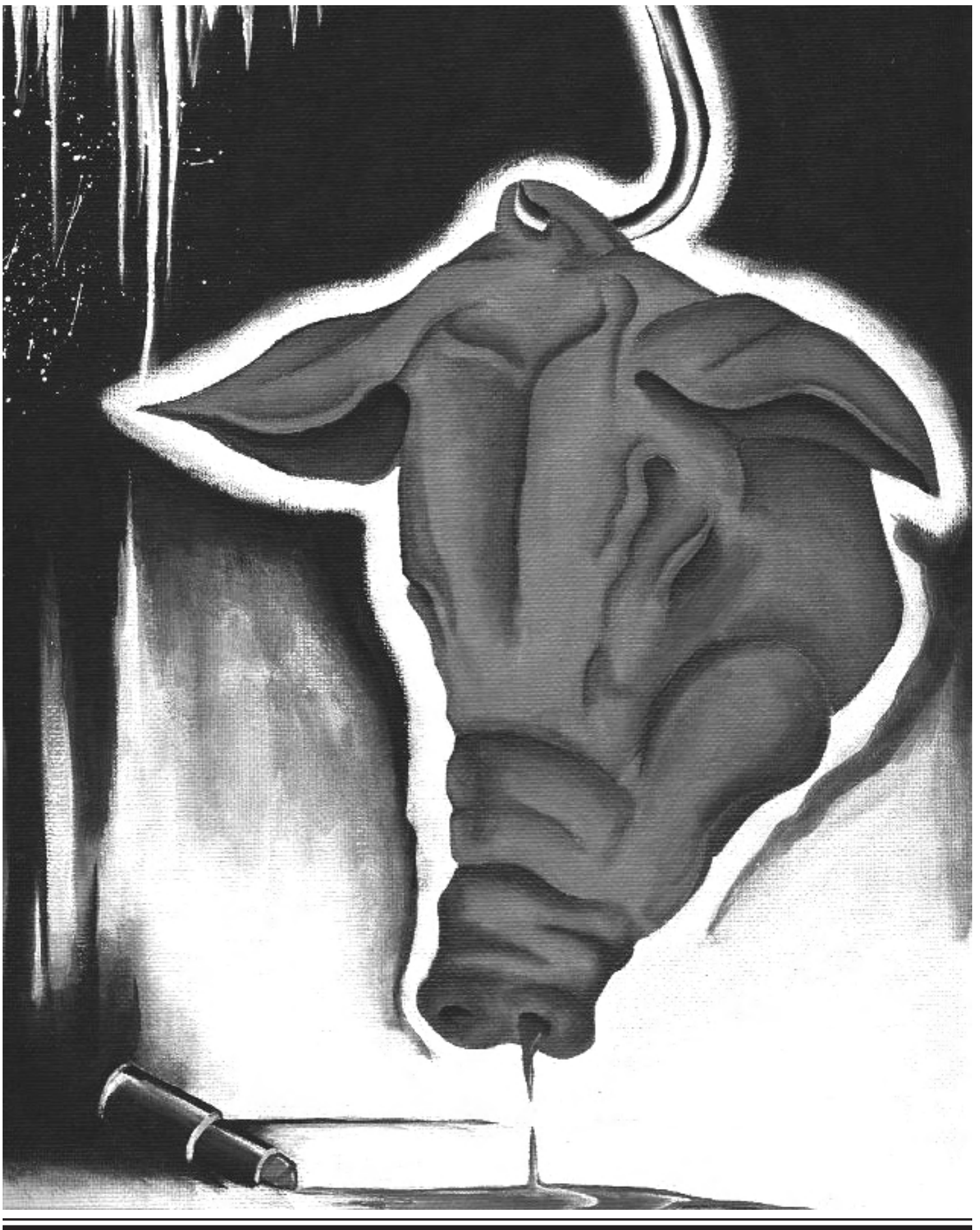
The young one smiled, "I guess we've done a good job with these experiments. Should we contact the commander?"

"Yes." The elder relocked the chest and stood back up. "We will contact home as soon as we clean up. Our tests will serve very important while constructing our plan of attack."

"What a bizarre race," the first said as the two individuals, who appeared human, lifted the chest.

"Indeed. They maintain a level curiosity that transcends all their better judgment. 90% of the time, as we have shown, they disregard instructions and open the chest, despite the warnings. They ignore any consequences that may result from their actions. Through similar but different tests, we've learned that they are nosey, greedy, selfish, and untrusting. And those will be the key components to how we will conquer the earthlings!"





THIS LITTLE PIGGY...

BY KEN GOLDMAN

*Like a true nature's child
We were born, born to be wild . . .*
—Steppenwolf (1968)

ILLUSTRATION BY ADAM GILLESPIE

THE LID OF THE SHOE BOX SLIPPED FREE. THE TINY HEAD DRENCHED IN ITS OWN SLIME EMERGED. WITH DIFFICULTY THE PIG-THING MANAGED TO SLITHER OUT LEAVING A TRAIL OF PINK MUCK THAT KOOPER AND ROCHELLE COULD ONLY STARE AT. IT CRAWLED CLOSE TO ROCHELLE'S LEG. SHE KICKED AT IT.

LAB DAYS WERE THE WORST FOR KOOPER whose stomach wasn't always up to the task when time came to inspect the gooey innards of assorted frogs and cats. Carver High's seniors called Wednesday's laboratory period Brown Bag Day because when Dr. Tompkins handed out those paper bags they were not intended for lunches going 'in' but for breakfasts coming 'out.'

But in February the dreaded day improved significantly when Tompkins paired Kooper with Rochelle Greene as his lab partner. Carver's standard issue lab coat had all the appeal of a nun's habit, but just knowing those juicy mammaries heaved somewhere beneath Rochelle's starched whites provided Kooper with enough wood to warm his BVD's the entire afternoon.

"Hey, Kooper. You ready to cut us some pig?" Rochelle greeted him with her best Daisy Duke accent as they took seats behind their dissecting tray. One smile from her made the thought of slicing into today's pig fetus seem genuinely erotic.

"In the immortal words of Larry the Cable Guy, let's 'Get 'er done!'"
Smooth.

Kooper examined the tools spread out upon their table : a pair of scissors and gloves, a scalpel, a blunt probe and needle probe, forceps, and that notorious brown bag. Rochelle slipped her hands into the plastic gloves like a debutante attending a summer ball, creating a mental snap shot

guaranteed to remain in Kooper's psyche until the last tooth fell out of his head.

Dr. Tompkins was probably born wearing laboratory whites, but the instructor almost bordered on cool if you overlooked his thinning hair and bad teeth. He enjoyed talking up this fetal pig exercise a little more than seemed healthy, but that was probably just a teacher thing like how Mr. Hermann practically ejaculated into his boxers over Shakespeare. Vomit inducing as it was, animal dissection seemed radical in its own Dr. Demento way. And Tompkins *did* pair Kooper with Rochelle, an act Kooper considered worthy of sainthood.

"Today you'll be examining in some detail the external and internal anatomy of genus *Sus scrofa*, a fetal pig. As a mammal, many aspects of its structural and functional organization are identical with those of other mammals, including humans, and our study is, in a very real sense, a study of our own organs. Of course, I'm not counting those organs inside our wrestling team."

Rochelle seemed engrossed. Kooper leaned forward, hands on his chin, simulating

interest too, although much more intriguing was the thought of his partner's ample rack.

"The fetuses you will use in the following weeks were salvaged from pregnant sows being

slaughtered for food. So ladies, unless you belong to the religious far right there's no need to shed tears over what may initially seem an act of cruelty." There were murmurs, and Tompkins grinned. "That goes for you men, too. There will be no bitching about today's politically incorrect lesson, okay? Today, we're scientists!" He walked to the large freezer, removed several plastic containers holding see-through bags. To occasional groans of disgust, Tompkins deposited fetal pigs all around like Christmas turkeys.

Rochelle opened the plastic bag and inspected the slimy remains slick with preservative. The thing looked more like a blood soaked Kermit than Miss Piggy. Placing the bag's contents in the tray she turned to Kooper. "Do we give it a name? Petunia? Sir Francis Bacon? Anna Nicole?"

"Anything but Babe. I couldn't live with that."

That smile again. Rochelle handed him the scalpel. "Dr. Kooper, if you would be so kind as to slice open our little friend . . ."

Tompkins appeared over the boy's shoulder.

"Mr. Kooper, careful. Never cut or move more than is necessary to expose a given part. You're not making a sandwich, okay? Here's your map." He handed Kooper

a color photograph with diagrams and labels of what he should expect to find inside his piglet. Tompkins patted the tiny head of the fetus, grinning. "That'll do, pig," he said, and walked off.

Kooper made his incision as the diagram showed. There was a small squirt of sticky goo and the cut wasn't as neat as he would have liked, nothing close to what he knew would score points with his lab partner. But he didn't ralph his Egg McMuffin either, and that was a plus.

"Nothing to it," he told his partner. "I'm picturing this is one of The Jonas Brothers."

"Don't let him bite." Rochelle leaned close, and her honey hair brushed Kooper's cheek. "Remember what happened to Peter Parker. Pig-Man doesn't really cut it as a super hero."

"Maybe I'll call myself Peter Porker? Champion of the cloven hoofed!"

"Keep slicing that ham, boy. I'll be right here quietly getting nauseous."

[Damn, she smells good.]

[Damn . . .]

"Damn!!"

Kooper's scalpel hit something hard as stone, something that wasn't supposed to be there according to the diagram. Maybe he had located skeletal bone or some abnormality. He bore down on the scalpel, putting more pressure into his incision. Whatever pig goo was inside, the organ wouldn't budge. He grabbed the forceps to separate the stomach, folding the flaps over like thick slices of lunch meat.

"Take a look, tell me what you see here. Then tell me I'm not crazy."

The two looked at the pig's innards, then at the diagram, back to the pig, then at each other.

"Kooper, this isn't right, is it? Nothing's where it's supposed to be. And the organs' shapes -- they're all wrong."

Kooper probed the fetus, and something was gonzo, all right. None of the pig's organs resembled the diagram's, and what looked like its heart couldn't have been its heart . . . because there were two of them. The innards seemed almost landscaped, a topiary of sculptured guts, and the organs weren't soft and squishy either. They felt almost solid.

Exploring with her own blunt probe Rochelle's face turned white.

"Kooper, feel this heart and tell me *I'm* not crazy. This is its heart, isn't it?"

"One of them." He touched the instrument to the organ.

Touched it to the second heart alongside its identical twin. He felt a light thump, felt his mouth go dry.

"I think it's beating," he said. "Holy shit! Both of them are!"

"There's nothing holy going on here, Kooper. What *is* this thing?"

"It's not pig. Not like any pig I've ever seen. Not its insides, anyway."

"How many pigs' insides have you seen?"

"Counting today? That would be none."

Outwardly the creature seemed too amorphous to positively identify it as much of anything. It certainly could have been a pig, at least a pig dipped in cherry jelly. But it was only a fetus, and if you looked closely at it, it could have been something else too.

"Maybe it's some kind of pig freak, some anomaly like Jo-Jo the dog boy at the circus?"

"Jo-Jo the dog boy doesn't look like this on the inside, Rochelle. Nothing I know does."

Dr. Tompkins stood clear across the laboratory overseeing the dumber kids' table. Kooper leaned close to Rochelle."

"I think we may have something here, something really big. You think Tompkins will just toss this thing into the garbage, not give it a second thought? Maybe when pigs learn to tap dance. The man probably could retire with what we have in this tray. And maybe so can we! Or at least cover a few years' tuition. No one else comes to this party, okay?"

Rochelle managed a grin. "You're a swine, Kooper. You know that, don't you?"

He snorted.

Reason kicked in and Rochelle turned pragmatist. "Maybe Tompkins' diagram is wrong.

Maybe some pigs' insides are supposed to look like this? I mean, it's possible, isn't it?"

"I doubt other pigs in this room have hearts that are still beating. Unless you want to count Martha Harrad." Kooper looked around, walked over to the desk alongside theirs where flat chested Penny Albertson and pimped Stanley Halpern were busy slicing away at organs that looked normal to him. Same thing at the next table. He returned to Rochelle, grabbed one of the brown barf bags. "I think time's come we consider a pignapping. There are other fetuses in Tompkins' freezer. We can make a switch. Little Baco Bits here goes into the bag."

They would be taking a huge risk. Dr. Tompkins would be tearing new ass holes if he found one of his fetals had

been pilfered. He had a thing about specimens leaving the lab because last term Arnold Fonaroff discovered one of his instructor's pig fetuses served up in his lunch tray.

Across the room Debbie Katz started losing her breakfast. Tompkins always assisted when things got messy in the lab, and Debbie's timing proved perfect. Rochelle shoved their fetal pig - or whatever it was - into the brown bag. Kooper managed to sneak off to the freezer to poach their specimen's understudy. He returned to their station and plopped the remains into the dissecting tray. Rochelle transferred the first specimen from beneath her lab coat into her book bag, and the fetal pig-thing disappeared like a magic trick.

Kooper savored every clandestine moment. "You and me, no one else. Oink once for yes."

"You want a signature in blood too?"

"We'll negotiate bodily fluids later. My place after school? Just to figure this thing out, plan our next move over some primo weed? I'll go online, do some research. I smell Nobel Prize here, Rochelle. Or at least the National Enquirer."

"What you smell is a dead pig decomposing in my book bag. I have cheerleading practice after school, but I can come tonight. I'll bring our little pal."

". . . who may not be dead *or* a pig."

Rochelle went white again. Brainy girls always had annoying second thoughts while breaking school rules, and Rochelle's GPA could bogus this whole adventure.

"Listen, Kooper, maybe we shouldn't be doing this."

Kooper leaned close to her. How could any girl smell so incredible? He could break every rule in the book for another whiff of her honey scented tresses. Had he possessed two hearts like their fetal companion he would have loved her with both of them.

"Rochelle Greene, Nobel Prize winner," he whispered to her. She gave an oh-what-the-hell shrug and strapped her bag tightly shut.

"Maybe when pigs fly."

The bell rang. Kooper wore a shit eating grin, cupped his hand to his ear at the sound.

"Somewhere in Heaven a pig is getting its wings."

Smooth.

* * *

Kooper watched the sun set from inside his tree house. When he was seven his father had built this retreat just for him in the old Oak behind the house. The man had been handy with tools, a talent his son unfortunately had not

inherited. His father also proved handy in other areas with Mrs. Sylvia Tidwell who lived down the street and with whom he had proven especially talented with one tool in particular. Stanley Kooper packed his bags a week following his son's tenth birthday. Tonight Kooper's mother had gone out on yet another of what seemed an endless stream of first dates with a new online stranger. Kooper hoped, at least for tonight, that Match.com's latest candidate didn't prove a creep and that she would be coming home late.

A high intensity lantern kept the tree house well illuminated after the sun went down. The enclosure was large enough to accommodate an old Sony boom box, a space heater, and a cooler for the requisite beer Kooper occasionally craved. In a secret compartment beneath the air mattress he kept a considerable stash of weed for those times a beer didn't suffice, as well as a good assortment of Penthouse and Hustler Magazines for when the weed didn't. The cooler contained its own guilty pleasures too, a couple of Snapple six packs and a handful of frozen Milky Ways. It could easily hold a lot more, if necessary. Tonight it would be necessary.

Kooper emptied the cooler. He did the same with a can of Coors.

Rochelle's Mustang pulled into the driveway at 7:30. She was headed for the front door when Kooper called to her.

"Sooooooooo-eeeeeeeeee! Soooooooooooo-eeeeee!"

She looked up.

"It's a pig call. You like it?"

"It's making me wet. How do I get up there with this bag of bacon I'm hauling?"

"Toss it, then climb like the amazon I know you are."

Rochelle tossed and climbed. She looked around, nodded her approval, joining Kooper sitting Indian style on the mattress.

"So this is your Fortress of Solitude, is it, Kal-el?"

"Welcome to the sanctuary of Pig-Man. Speaking of which . . ."

Rochelle's attention turned to the Nike box in front of him. "I had to transfer him to the box. He leaked through Tompkins' barf bag. I think he's pretty much defrosted by now. But there's a couple of things you should see."

She pulled off a rubber band and slid the lid from the box, and the two looked inside. The realization took a moment for Kooper to assimilate

"How could he grow so much in a few hours? Fuck me, he looks twice as big."

"There's more. Look closer. His eyes . . ."

"--They're open!!"

"You notice anything else?"

It took another moment to sink in.

"Where's the incision? Christ, this morning we had his stomach sliced wide open!"

"I believe the proper term for what's happening here is regeneration. I would imagine all those Trekkie years you put in would explain that much."

Rochelle had a point. The fetus no longer seemed a fetus. It had developed into something else. Just what that was Kooper could only guess.

Rochelle closed the lid, fastened the rubber band around it. "Okay, class. Who wants to explain just what freak of nature we have lurking inside teacher's Nike box? You, young Skywalker?"

Cute, even though she probably was scared shitless. Kooper liked that.

"I think I can explain what it isn't. It isn't a pig. Pigs don't regenerate or bacon would be a whole lot cheaper. Then again, it could be a pig. Just not the kind of pig whose pork chops you would want at your dinner table."

"Thanks for clearing that up."

"Think outside of the shoe box, okay? Dr. Tompkins mentioned his fetuses were taken from sows raised for slaughter, right? Those sows had to be kept in pens their whole lives, and a whole lot of them were probably bunched together getting fattened with pig slop as they waited for the big day. Suppose something got into that pen with them, something not quite a pig but close enough biologically to mate with one of them? Something alien and pig-like itself that wanted to mate - or *needed* to mate - wouldn't be interested in us tree apes, no more than we would be drawn to a porker. And suppose the way this alien pig-thing got into the pen was the same way it got out?"

Rochelle considered Kooper's hypothesis for a full three seconds. "Right. An alien from some distant star beams down here just to fuck a pig? That's not setting the cosmic bar very high, is it? What have you been smoking?"

"You said it, not me, Lieutenant Ripley."

"Get real. Aliens porking pigs? We have mutant ninja pigs in our midst? Maybe when pigs really do fly."

"Exactly! Pigs in space!"

Just saying it sounded ludicrous. The two almost laughed themselves sick. And then they stopped.

. . . because the box on the floor thumped. Rochelle stared hard at Kooper.

"Okay, this is officially getting weird."

train of his thoughts a voice.

"I got it wrong! A female must have climbed into that pig pen and got herself knocked up. Those pig slaughterers must have ripped her fetus from her thinking she had been dead with her throat cut, or whatever it is they do to kill pigs. In the dark among all those other pigs, maybe she looked like the others, but she's not . . . *she's not!* She made her getaway burrowing back through the dirt and regenerated just like her bloody pig fetus. And I'm thinking that Mama wants her baby back ribs, she wants that baby back bad. And here she is!"

"We're safe up here, aren't we? I mean, she can't possibly climb--"

But the sow thing *was* struggling to climb up the tree, its talons clutching at the bark and pulling its bulk toward them. Inside the cooler the piglet was screeching again. Rochelle looked behind her at the cooler, then spun back to watch the dark lump moving towards them.

"Pigs can't climb trees! They can't!"

"I may be guessing here, but I'm thinking this one can."

"Shit! *Shitshitshit!*"

"I don't think she's interested in us. Unless she's a big fan of Steppenwolf, I think we've got a mother and child reunion going on here. A mother hears her baby cry, she comes running. Or burrowing. You know what today is, don't you?"

"What are you talking about?"

"The date. Do you know today's date?"

"I don't know. February 2nd, I think. Kooper, we're going to die and you're asking me what day it is?"

A flat round snout the size of a basketball pushed through the door. The hinges gave way and the head shoved into the enclosure. Its mouth dripping thick gouts of saliva, the sow-thing stared at them cowering by the window. Nostrils flaring, she tried wriggling all the way through the entrance. Then she spotted the cooler.

Screeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!! Screeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!!!

The piglet chorus started again, but the shrieks took on an urgency not like before. The

massive sow-thing answered with a fog horn howl that rattled the small enclosure as if a subway were passing through. Kooper took Rochelle's hand, backed away from the window.

"It's February 2nd, Rochelle. Today is Groundhog Day!"

"That's no groundhog. Christ, Kooper, that's fucking Sasquash!!"

"Bigfoot, Barney the Dinosaur, I don't care. I think it might be a good idea to open that cooler now or *she's* going to be dissecting *us*."

Ass-crawling to the cooler, Kooper removed the boom box and pulled open the lid. He kicked the styrofoam container toward the she-creature still squirming to get through the entrance. The fetal piglet slithered from the cooler's lip and towards its mother like some misshapen Slinky. It climbed upon her back assisted by a few maternal nudges. Once firmly secured it gurgled contentedly. The sow turned to lick the residual gunk from her young one.

Rochelle had rolled herself into fetal position. The irony wasn't lost on Kooper. He got to his feet, approached the mother-creature.

"Okay, you got what you came for! Go back now. You saw your shadow. Six more weeks of winter. I get it!"

The sow snorted, gave her small passenger another maternal lick. She took him in her mouth and was gone. Kooper watched her burrow through the dirt and disappear into the earth like some prehistoric mole. For all he knew maybe that was exactly what she was. It didn't matter any more. Groundhog, pig, or Creature from the Black Lagoon, she was out of here. He turned toward Rochelle. She was shaking badly. He touched her shoulder.

"I think that's the end. Finis. Roll credits."

He glanced at the garden below to be certain. The tulip bed was a wreck. His mom was

probably going to kill him. It was a ridiculous concern given what they had been through, but Kooper had taken from his experience a new respect for motherhood. He turned his attention back to Rochelle.

"Well? Do I deliver a good time, or what?"

"This didn't happen. It couldn't have happened. It's too crazy!"

"I'm pretty sure if we tell anyone about this, they'll lock up both of us and melt the key."

Rochelle seemed about to lose it. Kooper reached for the six pack, coaxed a Coors from it and handed it to her.

"Tonight we just listened to some loud '60's music in my humble tree house. We smoked some weed, had a beer or two, maybe sucked some face. The usual shit. Tomorrow we get notes to excuse us from the rest of Tompkins' dissection labs. I'll get my mother to swear I'm Amish. I hear next week Tompkins is thinking of bringing in fetal cows."

Smooth.

Rochelle managed a semblance of composure. In another moment she would be Rochelle Greene again, female extraordinaire. He had no doubt of that.

"Kooper, I have to ask you something, okay?"

"Share."

Rochelle leaned against him, put her head on his shoulder, and sipped her beer.

"Would you turn off that boom box.? I really hate Steppenwolf."

* * *

Her young one was sleeping. That was good. She had almost lost him.

The little one had been through quite an ordeal today. But there remained a task she had not completed, and time was running out. So few males remained of their kind, so few left to produce young. She would have to act quickly. She would have to act tonight.

The female bore through the soil again. It was a difficult and dangerous journey tunneling to the surface, but some things could not wait. Tonight she would find another mate, perhaps the large canine she had spotted earlier near the humans' flower bed. So many four legged creatures, such a variety from which to choose.

But so often the four legged kind proved difficult to force into mating with her. Nature seemed odd in that way, and mating often proved futile, even treacherous. Many males fought her and clawed, sometimes hurting her. This was a chance she must take. There was little time.

Closer to the surface now. Much closer . . .

Perhaps, she considered, there were other solutions, other choices for her.

Perhaps, this next time, if another four legged male struggled or ran off, if it refused to mate with her . . .

Then perhaps she should find something else, make a different selection.

Yes, she could do that. She could find something slower, weaker.

She could do that tonight.

Tonight she would select something with two legs . . .



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IMPRISONED BY THE BEAST

BY JAMES REID

ILLUSTRATION BY JOHNNY TRAN

AFTER THE BEAST WAS
DONE WITH CLEARING
OUT THE TORSO, HE
TORE OFF A LEG AT THE
KNEE AND THREW IT TO
ME. I HATE MYSELF FOR
DOING IT, BUT BECAUSE
IT IS THE ONLY SOURCE
OF FOOD IN THIS PLACE,
I BENT DOWN AND
GNAWED AWAY AT THE
SEVERED LEG.

I HAVE BEEN DOWN HERE FOR SO LONG, if I am even really beneath anything. Nor do I even know where it is I really am, though I have been here for so very long, I only know that I am in the lair of a beast.

I have seen many fall prey to this beast through out the years. This beast is monstrous in size close to seven and a half feet tall, and as wide as five men. He has long dark orange hair and a short beard of the same color covering its scab like face. Its chest has fur in the shape of an upside down triangle revealing a stomach of blackened flesh. The rest of the body has the strange orange fur. This monster of what I wish were fantasy wears human rib bones in his ears like earrings and has long feet with curled claw-like toe nails and hands to match. As for myself, I do not know it has been so long since I have seen my reflection. Neither do I remember my name.

The beast does not bother me as much as he used to when he first brought me down here. I thought I was going to die that night. I was camping with my wife and three children when it happened. It came out of the woods and killed them all. I tried to stop it, but I was knocked unconscious. When I woke up I was here chained at the ankle. The beast is not always in this place. He goes out when I think it is night fall to collect his victims. Every night I hear screams, horrible screams for help and of lost sanity. The last person the beast brought down here was a young

man, his throat crushed and his body convulsing, trying to breathe before he died. He was one of the lucky ones. The beast likes to hear his food scream while he is eating them. I searched the pockets of his clothing for things to help pass the time, and maybe for something to get these old chains off of me. But the only thing this young man had with his corpse was a leather bound book with empty pages tucked underneath his shirt and a pen in his pocket. Writing this is the best way to pass time down here even though I do not believe anyone will find this or be able to read in the darkness.

I do not know or understand why this thing keeps me alive; I hate the beast for this reason. I watch him prepare his meals; he grabbed the body of the young man and threw it down hard onto the stone table, which is the only other thing in this dark place besides dirt. The beast tore open the man's stomach with one swipe of its pointer finger claw, and I watched disgustedly as the beast slurped up the intestines as if they were spaghetti. After the beast was done with clearing out the torso, he tore off a leg at the knee and threw it to me. I hate myself for doing it, but because it is the only source of food in this place, I bent down and gnawed away at the severed leg. The beast watched me and laughed a deep guttural laugh, then continued eating when I was done. After I finished I drank from a puddle near by me, which was formed from a liquid that might be water dripping from the ceiling. As I write these words I start to feel the drowsiness of sleep washing over me, so I let myself drift into the pleasant dreams of not waking.

* * *

I woke to the sounds of a woman screaming. It made my head hurt and the beast did not like it too much either. He stuck a clawed finger into her side and snarled, hot wet saliva being spit into her face. The combination of pain and what must have been fiction in her eyes caused great strain, she fainted. The beast chained her ankle to the wall opposite mine. The room wasn't that large, merely twenty feet by twenty-two feet by my estimate, with three walls and an opening to a tunnel which no light ever shines through. The great stone table takes up a lot room, the beast eats and sleeps upon this slab of rock. I am and have been chained to the wall on the left hand side. The new woman is on the right. The beast did not eat her on this day. He crawled onto the table and fell asleep.

After a long wait, the girl stirred and woke, panic quickly flooded over her and she started to scream again. I told her to stop before she woke it.

"Who's there?" she said in a frightened voice."

"What do you want with me?" I reassured her that it was not me that brought her here. Then she started to remember.

"Oh God, that thing that horrible thing, it killed my husband!" she sobbed, becoming more hysterical with each word. I tried to tell her to stay quiet, but the stirring of the beast made my point clear.

"You have to stay as quiet as possible. He doesn't like noise very much . . . I learned the hard way." I said.

"What happened to you?" she asked.

"Don't you worry about it, you will be ok, I have been here a long time," I replied.

"What's going to happen to me? I can't see anything, it's so dark in here," She said.

I went silent. I dared not tell this girl of her fate and scare her into a screaming frenzy. "Just get some sleep, your eyes will adjust and remember what I said."

"What's your name? Mine is Iris," she said.

"I can not remember."

Soon all fell silent except for the snoring of the beast.

The next day, I think, the Beast brought a young couple into the cave, the girl was unconscious, but the boy was screaming in horror. His eyes were wide with fright as the Beast dropped the girl on the table and then lifted him up to eye level with the Beast himself. The boy kept screaming uncontrollably as the Beast's burning hot breath washed over his face. All of this action woke the Iris. She immediately started to scream. This greatly angered the Beast. He slammed the boy to the ground and stomped on his head. The boy's head burst open and squished like a ripe tomato. Oh, how I miss tomatoes!

The sudden silence did not comfort the Iris, but only made her screaming much worse. The beast then proceeded to tear off the unconscious girl's arm which made her wake up with a terribly screeching shriek as her blood sprayed out of her arm socket. The girl luckily died quickly afterward from the loss of blood, maybe even shock. The Beast tossed the arm to me, then tore out the girl's organs from the stomach and slapped it down in front of the Iris who finally heeded my warnings and shut up. The corpses were quickly consumed in a very sloppy manner, with blood and slobber flying every where. Soon after the Beast ate, he quickly went to sleep

on that horrible table.

"Are you still alive?" Iris asked.

"Yes, those were some other fortunate people." I replied.

"What the fuck do you mean fortunate?" she said dangerously loud.

After a moment I said, "I say that because they will not have to witness the horrors we will see everyday." Iris only cried in reply. After awhile of her crying she asked me how long I have been here. "I have lost all track of time in this hellish place." I told her. "I do not really remember much of my past anymore, the only memories of the past I have are of what happened to my family." I begin to cry.

"That's horrible!" she said.

I try to stop my senseless sobbing and tell her to eat her food quickly before it starts to spoil.

"What food?" she asked. Then she saw it, the pile of organs the Beast gave to her. She screamed. Very loud, the Beast almost woke, but she covered her mouth after a second.

"That's fucking gross! Its cannibalism! I can't eat that. I think I'm going to be sick!" she said disgustedly.

"You must. The Beast will not give you anymore food until you eat that. I learned the hard way. It is much better to eat it fresh than half decayed. It is much easier to keep it down this way. I hate doing it too, but if you want to survive down here you will have to eat it." I started to eat the arm, as Iris reluctantly ate the organs, choking, gagging, and crying until it was gone. I drifted off to sleep after my meal.

I awoke to Iris's screaming. The horror that I saw when I looked in her direction; I dare not write what I have witnessed.

"HHHEEELLLPPPP!!!!" Iris screamed off the top of her lungs. How she could breathe under the Beast's weight I do not know. She kept screaming and screaming. I could not stand listening to it any longer. It was over in moments, how she survived, I do not know. The Beast got off of her and left. She would not talk to me, no matter how much I tried. She only laid there screaming and crying.

I stayed awake too afraid to sleep anymore. The Beast never came back. It has been a long time, since the Beast left. Iris still would not talk. The only time she was not crying was in her sleep. That is when she relived the horrible event. Her sleep was filled with screams. It must have been days since the Beast left. Iris's stomach seems to be getting bigger by the day. Can the Beast really reproduce with

humans? I dare not think about it as I finally fall asleep.

I awoke to her screaming again, I was frightful for her that the Beast came back. To our horror he was not, instead something is moving under her skin. I fear I know what is happening. As I write this finally words frantically, the Beast's spawn are tearing through her flesh and devouring her. There are at least a dozen of these creatures picking what is left of her clean. They see me now and start to claw their way toward me, scrambling over each other to get to their prize. I only hope they make it quick.



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STOPPING THE BLOBBIES

BY RICHARD PITANIELLO

ILLUSTRATION BY ALONDRA PONCE

ROSIE WAS ALL BLOOD AND BAWLING in her arts and crafts room, wiping gray eyes with child fists, sticking her black hair together. Her hot tears melted eye shadow, dripping lines down her face, lines much like the dark tattoos on her back and her legs and her arms. Those tattoos and her age and her body all belonged to someone who was too old for the crayons and construction paper all around Rosie, but she still liked them as much as she liked knives and scalpels and the needles that had licked tattoos onto her body. Some people wondered if her brain was tattooed too and that's why it didn't work any more.

At any rate, Rosie was damn damn sad in her art room that day, because: "No more Blobbies!" she cried. "I can't make no more! I'm clean out of hearts!"

She had gallons of blue gel-glue, but she didn't have objects to pour the glue over and encapsulate.

For that's how to make her art Blobbies: pour blue glue on a small something--a heart--and make a little blob that she could talk to and touch and kiss. Rosie had made so many of these and she wanted to make so many more.

But her piggybank money on her dresser, all the spiders in the corners of the room, all the roaches flowing up the

walls, all her own bloody teeth and fingernails that she ripped out with pliers and which turned the blue gel-glue black and ruined it all dammit . . . all these things were gone.

So Rosie cried, sputtered, streaked red over the table in despair. She knew: There can be no more blobbies.

Unless . . .

She stopped, open gray eyes she had scratched rosy. She smiled, squealed: "Of course!"

So she got up and drank a whole friggin' gallon of gel-glue. Then she sloshed her body out to the garage where the chipper-shredder waited. She poured tons more glue under the shredder. Then she yanked the starter cord and fired the shredder up in a whirl.

And Rosie was happy again, ready to make her body into thousands of hearts for thousands of Blobbies, even if she wouldn't have eyes left to see them with. In the end, heart is all that matters.

So she jumped in the shredder and gave all the babies her heart and the rest of her, smiling as long as she still had a smile and a face.



SLICING THROUGH THE QUESTION

A POEM BY KEATON FOSTER



Cutting deep.
Razor sharp.
To the very bone.
To the heart of me.
The blade is dull.
The pain is God.
The blood pools.
The stain will remain.
The scars remind.
The night claims me.
The darkness is mine.
Not by choice, by force.
Free will has been lost.
Choices have been made.
Handed down.
Great pain, immeasurable shame.
Afraid to live, fearful of death.
Complex, misunderstood enigma.
Self-loathing, self-absorbed.
Undeniable in my brilliance.
Stupid with irreverence.
Value of a life lost.
Searching in vain.
Meaning undefined.
Lessons so clear.

I have learned so much.
I have retained it all.
Most afraid, most alone.
Terrified is too simple of a word.
Absolute leaves much behind.
Pain is pale, lacking in description.
Nothing is close, yet so far away.
All I can do is breathe.
Each breath is forced upon me.
The heart beats against my own desire.
Life proceeds.
Death I fear, because
Of the uncertainty in its shape.
Life I understand.
Maybe in ways I wish
I had no clue about.
I must, I have to.
I will forever be
Slicing through the question
As to why?

* * *

Some things will forever be unfinished.

Introducing Stark Raven Press



Our Mission is to create the highest quality books.

We are a new small press that specializes in publishing speculative fiction books (horror, science fiction, and dark fantasy). Our primary objective is to produce quality books at an affordable price with the avid reader, collector, or investor in mind.

Currently we are focused on producing the best in anthologies from stories that appear in our sister publication, *Macabre Cadaver*, an online magazine of speculative fiction, art, and poetry, but also we will eventually publish books from new and established authors.

We do not charge any fees to publish books. We do not resale books with hefty markups to authors. We buy stories and books for publication and payment is made through a contract with pre-arranged agreements on advances, and royalties from sales.

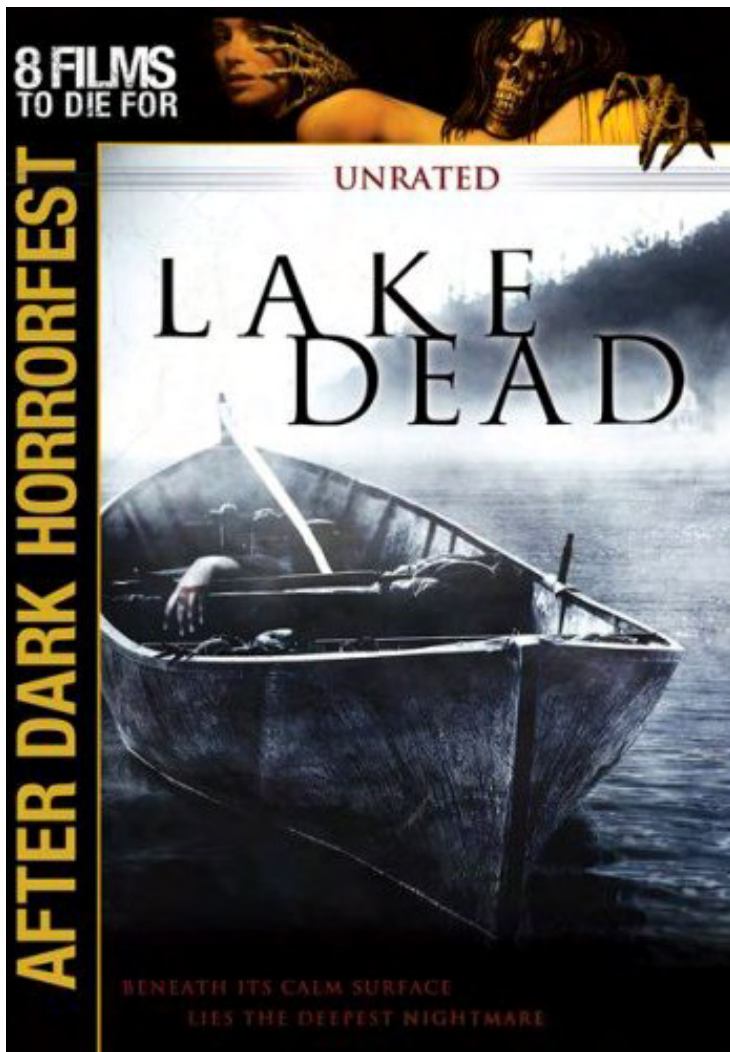
This is a serious business for us and we do this mostly out of love for the written word and the joy of producing wonderful books for readers to enjoy and of which authors can be proud. We may only publish one book in a year, but you can bet it will be a good one. We strive for quality over quantity.

The best anthologies from *Macabre Cadaver* magazine.

Currently Stark Raven Press is focused on producing the best in anthologies from stories that appear in our sister publication, *Macabre Cadaver* online magazine, but also we will eventually publish books from new and established authors. If you want to see your story in print we suggest you head over to *Macabre Cadaver* and try submitting your story there. We are not accepting any outside submissions at this time, except for those that come through the *Macabre Cadaver* magazine website.

Selection of stories for the first anthology will be underway shortly and publication can be expected to begin within the first half of 2009. Authors will be contacted if his or her story has been selected and the details will be arranged from that point forward.

If you would like to find out more information visit www.macabrecadaver.com or www.starkravenpress.com and contact the editors from either website.



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